

Into the Black by kinghairington

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Summary:

Jacqueline Cooper was once the Queen of Hawkins High, but after a fight with Carol, she ran away from her best friend and popularity. Then Will Byers and Barbara Holland disappeared and they were thrust back into each other's worlds.

1. Chapter One

Author's Note:

This is my first ever Stranger Things and OC fic. It's a bit of a reimagining if there had been a core four of teenagers on the show. I do not own Stranger Things, any of its characters, or dialogue. I did use some of the same scenes, of course, but I tried to make them fit that idea and made them my own. It will get a little more AU as things go on. Hope you enjoy!

Hawkins, Indiana

Fall 1983

Walking through the doors of Hawkins High, Jacqueline Cooper kept her eyes straight in front of her. A couple months ago she could have looked around and talked to some of her classmates, but a lot of things had changed.

The town was a town on edge after 12-year-old Will Byers and 16-year-old Barbara Holland had mysteriously disappeared within a couple of days time. It was unlike any tragedy that the town had ever experienced. Parents in the small town were becoming overprotective in a way they never had before and teens at Hawkins High weren't talking about much else in the school hallways. All in all, the town had been turned upside down.

The general consensus regarding the disappearance of Will Byers was that his brother Jonathan had something to do with it. At least that was the gossip at the school. Of course, it was ridiculous. If you were unpopular, any sort of unsavory rumors were bound to get started. He wasn't a violent person, but Jonathan was an easy target. His reputation came mostly from his antisocial behavior and the fact that he almost always had a camera hanging from his neck. Popularity was obviously not on his side.

Jacqueline understood this all too well. After a fall from the top of the high school food chain, the former Queen of Hawkins High was now friendless herself.

Meanwhile, Nancy Wheeler was making her way toward the top of that chain thanks to the attention from King Steve Harrington, one of the only people who had ever managed to break Jacqueline's heart. Not that he knew anything about that.

But when the Barb went missing, Jacqueline had to put aside her feelings toward Nancy (Was it jealousy? Envy? Anger?) and reach out. They barely knew each other as they were in different grades, but Barb had been smart enough and nice enough, to tutor Jacqueline in math for the last few months. In that way, Nancy and Jacqueline had something connecting them that wasn't Steve. As far as Jacqueline was concerned, that meant more than a boy.

So, as much as it unnerved her to approach the sophomore, knowing that there would be someone gossiping about it the second they were seen talking, Jacqueline found Nancy at her locker the morning that the news of Barb's disappearance broke.

"Hey," she started simply, clutching her books to her chest and attempting to look as cool, calm, and collected as possible. There were already people watching their exchange and soon, she was sure, rumors that she was trying to take back her throne or groveling at the new queen's feet. It made her hands shake and she gripped the books tighter, causing her fingertips to turn white and ache.

Nancy immediately paused in retrieving her own textbook, one hand holding the locker door open. And the surprise flickered through her eyes before something else replaced it, nervousness.

That made two of them.

"Oh. Hi, Jacqueline."

Jacqueline smiled softly at her, wanting to ease the girl's nerves because this wasn't about popularity or Steve.

"I just wanted to say that I'm really sorry about Barb. I know you two are close." She nodded to herself and let her eyes flick around the ever-growing crowd in the hallway. Sure enough, there was Carol hanging onto Tommy's arm with her eyes trained on the pair. Forcing her attention back to Nancy, she continued, "She's been tutoring me

in math for a while. Don't know if she ever mentioned that, but she was - is a sweet girl. I hope she's back soon."

Her cheeks felt hot with embarrassment and she sent Nancy a final smile that came out more like a grimace before stepping to the side. As if on cue, she spotted Steve walking down the hall in that direction and turned quickly to leave.

"Thanks," Nancy finally said from behind her. "There's a search party after school."

Jacqueline nodded and looked back to her, noticing that Nancy looked like she wanted to say more at the same time that Steve, followed closely by Tommy trying to look intimidating and a smirking Carol, approached the locker. Her eyes met Steve's for just a moment before she focused back on Nancy and gave a terse nod.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

Before any of the other three could say anything, she continued on her way down the hall. It wasn't until she was in her next class that she let her shoulders fall.

It felt like half the town showed up to search for Barbara Holland that night. News had already made its way around that Will Byer's body had been recovered from a quarry nearby and, although it was still blocked off from the search, it made sense to look for Barb in that area.

Jacqueline showed up alone that night but found herself pairing up with Nancy. It was an extremely awkward experience for both of them. Jacqueline because she evidently had no idea how to talk to anyone anymore. And, sure, there were Jacqueline's uncomfortable feelings toward Nancy, but she wasn't prepared to get into that. She was sure she would never be ready for that.

They were both there for the same reason, though, to find Barb, and

at that moment, they were both more determined to do that than anything else. They didn't have to be friends to care about the same person.

Through the couple hours walk, few things were said, but to both of their relief, it was mostly about Will and Barb. Never once did either of them mention the situation between them.

By the end of the night, even without any sign of Barb or her whereabouts, Jacqueline felt a bit of a weight lifted off her shoulders. Sending Nancy a genuine smile, she leaned forward to hug the younger girl. Nancy was a couple inches taller than her, so that was awkward for a moment, but Nancy seemed to appreciate the action.

"They'll find her," Jacqueline whispered as she pulled away.

"I'm going to find her," Nancy corrected and Jacqueline nodded slowly, almost impressed with the look in her eyes. "I'm looking more tonight."

"Whoa. Are you sure? That's dangerous, especially right now."

Nancy looked down and then back up, shyly, "I'll be at Steve's."

"Right." With a sudden tightness in her throat, Jacqueline forced out a quick, "Good night," and rushed off to her car.

The next couple days went by without much development in Jacqueline's life or the search for Barb. School was excruciating, but that had been expected. She and Carol had two almost altercations while she tried to talk to Nancy, and it was obvious that Nancy knew all about it from the look on her face as the girls practically squared off in the hallway. Their fight a couple months ago was still fresh in her mind.

Their little party had been going well after the boys left until Jacqueline stupidly thought that Carol would stick by her, thanks to a few too many

cups of whatever mixed drink Carol had whipped up for them. But Carol was also feeling the effects of the alcohol and she was even harsher in those moments.

Then Jacqueline muttered the words, "I think I'm going to tell Steve" and all hell broke loose. It was all due to Carol's jealousy and Jacqueline knew it.

As soon as Carol tried to convince her not to do it, to not embarrass herself, Jacqueline shakily pushed herself up from the couch and glared Carol's way.

"You're just jealous!" Jacqueline accused, her eyes flashing angrily. There had been plenty of arguments between the two since they had known each other since 2nd grade, but this all stemmed from years of Jacqueline holding in her feelings. "You're jealous because I'm more popular than you. And if Steve feels the same, no one will care about you and Tommy anymore. You don't care about my embarrassment."

Jacqueline blew out a breath as Carol stood and met her gaze with one full of just as much venom. If not more.

"Like hell, I'm jealous of you. You know we're just friends with you because of Steve, right? He didn't want to leave you behind after your daddy left, but lover boy's got his eyes set on Nancy Wheeler now." Carol fixed her with a look that said 'take that' and Jacqueline tried her best to not let the surprise show on her face. Carol's voice took on a babying tone as she patted Jacqueline's shoulder. "Oh, you didn't know? So, sure, go ahead and embarrass yourself."

Carol grinned at her before taking another sip of her drink. Jacqueline was sure this was the end of that friendship, not that it was much of one, but the thought of Steve leading her on for so long caused her eyes to burn. They had been best friends since they were 13. She wanted to scream. So she did the one thing she had inherited from her dad and bolted. Up the stairs, out the door, and down the street, she walked as quickly as her legs could take her until she was a few streets over and had to stop to get her bearings.

Once she was back in the safe confines of her house, thankful for once that her mom was already in bed, she leaned against the door and allowed

herself to cry.

If she could control anything, that was going to the last time she let someone make her cry.

Her feelings hadn't changed much since that fight; she still stupidly cared for Steve and distance had done little to change that. Seeing Steve in the halls and class was still difficult, especially now that he had a girlfriend, but Jacqueline couldn't deny that Nancy would probably be a good change for him. Nancy was definitely a nicer person than Carol and Tommy. As much as it hurt, there was a great amount of relief knowing that he would have a positive influence in his life. And that made her angry at herself for still caring so much about him.

She briefly wondered what their friendship could have been like without Carol and Tommy involved, but that was something she couldn't think about too long or she would either tell him everything she felt or do something else that she would equally regret.

So she tried to stay in the shadows as much as possible, sitting in new seats away from him in their classes and rushing out of class the second the bell rang.

Her house had become colder since the day her dad left and her mother began to either be out all the time or closing herself up in her room. Before all of this, she would have been out with Carol, Nicole, or Steve, but she had become accustomed to eating dinners alone and spending her evenings doing homework in silence or music playing on the record player.

It was completely unusual for the phone to ring.

When she first heard it, she ignored it until she realized just how strange it was for someone to be calling. It could be her mom calling from work or a friend's house, so she pushed herself up from her desk and walked over to the phone on her bedside table.

“Hello?”

“Jacqueline? It’s Nancy, Nancy Wheeler.”

“Hi, Nancy,” she said slowly, unsure as to why the girl would be calling her. Or how she had her phone number at all. She sat down on the bed and twirled the cord around her finger.

“Steve gave me your number,” Nancy explained as if she was reading her mind. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. What’s up?”

“This is going to sound crazy, but I need help.”

Jacqueline’s mind flooded with thoughts of what the girl could need her help with. Clothes? Date ideas?

But the request that came out of Nancy’s mouth shocked her so much that she almost lost her grip on the phone.

“I need someone to go with me to the woods. I’m going to find Barb.”

And, well, damn, she couldn’t say no when the confidence and determination was so strong in Nancy’s voice.

Jonathan Byers was there with Nancy when Jacqueline arrived. That was unexpected. She hadn’t said more than two words to him since high school began, and from the look on his face, that might not change anytime soon. His brother had just been buried that day and she couldn’t imagine he was going to be more talkative than usual.

Nancy looked relieved when she saw her and Jacqueline felt a surge of pride flow through her at being able to show up for someone. She held up a bag with a flashlight, thermos of hot tea, and a first aid kit in it.

“So, what the hell is going on?” She asked.

After listening to Nancy and Jonathan explain to her all about some Christmas lights, pictures of a monster in Steve’s backyard, and the idea that Will and Barb had been taken, the pair left her sitting on the trunk of her car in astonishment. It was obvious that they were whispering about her from the way Jonathan kept glancing over and shaking his head while they spoke.

It took a few minutes for all of the information to soak in, mostly that Jonathan didn’t believe that his brother was dead despite his body having been found, but she wasn’t going to let him make her feel like she didn’t belong there. She was in this now and, as determination flowed through her veins, she slid off the car and walked over.

Nancy looked at her expectantly and Jacqueline squared her shoulders and said, “Let’s find them.”

“Why are you doing this?” Jonathan asked her some time later. Nancy sent him a look before Jacqueline shrugged. It wasn’t a bad question. She was bored, sure, but this was potentially the most dangerous thing she could be doing.

“Barb has always been nice to me and not because she felt like she had to be.” Jacqueline was a normal teenager as far as she was concerned, even while she was riding Steve’s popularity. “Plus, your brother is a child. If someone has them, we have to do something.”

Jonathan seemed to be mulling this over before asking, “But shouldn’t you hate Nancy?”

“Sure,” she answered quickly. Nancy glanced at both of them in offense before Jacqueline hit her shoulder with her own. “But I don’t.”

They were all silent for a few minutes as they walked through the woods. To anyone else, they would look like an unlikely trio, but in that moment, with most of their feelings for one another out in the open, they made a good team.

“And don’t tell me how to feel, Byers,” she said suddenly, a firm tone

to her voice. "I - I don't let people dictate my actions anymore."

And that was all that was said for a while. Until suddenly, she ended up split up from the other two, wandering off by herself. It wasn't until she heard Jonathan yelling out Nancy's name that she found him, running over to him with wide eyes.

"Jonathan, what's going on?"

"She walked off and I can't find her," he said in a panic and she yelled out the other girl's name before looking at him.

"It's okay. We'll find her. We can split up; I'll go that way." She pointed to her left with the flashlight but Jonathan quickly shook his head and pulled her after him, shouting out for Nancy repeatedly.

Then they heard a loud scream and Jonathan turned toward the sound, taking off towards it. Jacqueline ran as fast as she could after him, tripping over a branch and dropping her flashlight. By the time she got it, Jonathan was no longer in her sight, so she walked the direction he was going and waited to hear him or Nancy.

It didn't take long to hear him and she started running again, hearing him telling Nancy to follow his voice. When she got to him, he was standing in front of a tree that had some sort of glowing goo on the side of it.

"What the hell?" She whispered to herself as Jonathan went closer to the tree and begged Nancy to come out. The shock was running through her body as a hand pushed through the tree and she screamed out, putting her hand over her own mouth before Jonathan realized that it was Nancy and began to pull her out.

Once the girl was out of the tree, a freaking *tree*, Jonathan and Nancy collapsed onto the ground and Jacqueline let herself close her eyes to take a deep breath.

What the hell was going on in this town?

2. Chapter Two

Sleep didn't come easily to her that night, so Jacqueline stayed up flipping through the encyclopedias left in her dad's study. Not surprisingly, there wasn't any relevant information about what she had witnessed that night. She wasn't scared exactly, more confused and lonelier than usual because, while Nancy had someone to take her home that night who had been there, Jacqueline had driven herself home with shaking hands and checked the locks at least ten times before forcing herself to the bathroom to take a shower.

It took all of her self-control not to pick up the phone and call someone. She could have called Carol if it meant she would be able to hear someone else's voice on the other end. Anything would have been better than hearing Nancy's screams repeat in her mind.

She fell asleep eventually on top of a volume of the encyclopedia that included the word 'monster'.

The next day being Saturday would usually be a relief, but Jacqueline would have much-preferred being at school. At least people would be around. She couldn't even call Nancy and see how she was because she hadn't thought to ask for her phone number.

But she knew that she couldn't walk around her house alone all day, so she decided to go into town and spend her day at the library or go to the movies.

She was coming out of the theater after seeing *All the Right Moves* feeling lighter but not too much less anxious when she heard shouting coming from the alleyway. It was easy to pick up on Nancy and Carol's voices, and Steve's. She let out a breath, shaking her head at herself for heading that direction as she rounded the corner and saw the boys fighting. Carol and Tommy were watching and Nicole was standing there like it was the most amusing thing she'd ever seen

“Oh, come on,” she muttered to herself as she walked up and tilted her head, glaring at Tommy as he tried to get Jonathan away from Steve. Steve pushed him back and then suddenly he was on the ground with Jonathan on top of him.

“Tommy, make him stop!” Jacqueline and Carol yelled out at the same time and she ran a hand through her hair nervously, unsure what to do. Steve had been in several fights in the last year and he lost all of them. Why he continued to do it, she never understood.

Police sirens behind her caused her to turn around and she walked over to Nancy, the other noticing her for the first time.

“It’s okay, Nancy,” she said quietly, pushing the girl closer to the building so the police officer could get through.

Tommy told Carol to leave and finally stepped in to tell Jonathan that Steve had had enough. A part of her wanted to go over to make sure he was okay, but before she could, two officers were approaching and Jonathan unintentionally elbowed one into his car.

“Oh shit,” she muttered, looking at the scene in surprise as Jonathan was being handcuffed. Tommy pulled Steve up and then they were running off with the girls.

Jacqueline placed a hand on Nancy’s arm as she watched their retreating forms.

It wasn’t until they were leaving to follow the police car to the station that she saw the Nancy ‘The Slut’ Wheeler spray painted on the marquee.

It was times like that she didn’t understand why she had any sort of feelings toward Steve other than disgust. Popularity had changed him.

Nancy filled her in on everything, the pictures and Jonathan’s camera and all the things Steve had said to her and Jonathan, while they were waiting for Jonathan to finish giving his statement. She sat outside while Nancy went in to see if he could talk.

It felt like her emotions were having a war inside of her. On the one

hand, there was a girl who was sweet and innocent who deserved to be treated so much better. On the other hand, she knew someone that they didn't and it pained her to see him constantly going down the path he was headed.

"Explain this plan to me again," Jacqueline said as she stared in disbelief at Nancy and Jonathan. Before either of them could actually say anything, she waved her hand and shook her head before continuing to speak. "You're going to attract this monster to your house, trap it, and set it on fire." They were standing outside of the police station at their cars. Nancy and Jonathan watched her for a few moments as she ran a hand through her hair and muttered something to herself that sounded a lot like, "This is crazy."

Jonathan finally stepped forward and put his hands on her shoulders. She looked up at him, leaning her body slightly back into her car. It was a shock that he was touching her and she couldn't help the unease that made its way down her spine.

"Look, it's okay if you don't want to help," he said softly and she swallowed thickly, pushing away from the car and relaxing a bit under his hands.

"This is so dangerous. What if one of you gets hurt or, worse, you get killed?" Her voice had gotten higher and she darted her eyes around the parking lot before lowering it. "I don't want to get killed before I get out of this town. I know that you two have this huge connection to this thing." But I don't. It was a selfish thought, she knew, and her cheeks began to flush as she looked into Jonathan's eyes.

"You don't," he said, nodding his head. "You can go home."

There was no judgment in his voice and she was thankful for that. It wasn't that she didn't care about Will and Barb, but she was just a teenager. Whatever this thing was, it was definitely bigger and stronger than all of them. How were they supposed to stop this thing

by themselves? Chances were they would be the ones getting killed.

Nancy, who had watched the entire exchange without saying anything, finally stepped forward and next to Jacqueline.

“He’s right. You don’t have to help, but we’re going to kill it.” Her voice was much harder than Jonathan’s, but more toward the monster than Jacqueline.

Jonathan pulled his hands away and immediately pushed them into the pockets of his coat, stepping back and letting Nancy move closer to Jacqueline. Nancy searched Jacqueline’s eyes, Jacqueline wasn’t sure what for, but she seemed to find it because she nodded a moment later.

“I’m going to go home,” Jacqueline said softly, eyes flicking from Nancy to Jonathan and then back to the other girl. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Nancy walked back over to Jonathan and Jacqueline turned around without another word, unlocking her car door and opening it. Then she turned to look at the pair.

“Be careful,” she said firmly. “I better see you both at school Monday.”

3. Chapter Three

Night was quickly approaching and Jacqueline had been sitting at her desk since she'd arrived home. She tried to work on her homework, but instead all she was able to focus on was the worry about what Nancy and Jonathan were dealing with in that moment. She had made the safe choice coming back home, she was sure of that, but there was a voice in her head nagging at her, telling her that she had run away. She was good at that.

"No!" She shouted suddenly, the noise echoing in the quiet room. Groaning, she let her head fall forward into her hands.

Jacqueline didn't want to be a coward, she didn't want to constantly run away from her problems, but at this point, she didn't know what else to do. She could run *to* someone; she could go to Steve and she was sure they could find comfort in each other. But that would be wrong for both of them.

Letting out a sigh, she lifted her head and looked into the mirror above her desk. She had barely slept other than for a few minutes at a time over the past couple of days and it was beginning to show on her face. She should sleep. Yes, she could do that. When she woke up, this would all be over, but she already knew that a restful sleep wouldn't come to her.

She could go for a drive. Or a walk. The cold air would be good for her, it would wake her up and help her think straight.

Pushing her chair back, she stood up and grabbed her coat, pulling it on as she walked to the front door. Once she was outside, she breathed deeply, letting the cold air fill her lungs and chest. It helped her breathe easily, sure, but her mind was still racing.

She shivered as she saw the setting sun. It was going to be dark and colder soon and there was no way she felt safe enough to be walking alone. So she pulled her keys out of her pocket and got in the car, starting it up and sitting in the driveway while she waited for it to heat up.

The radio did little to calm her nerves while she drove aimlessly through the town, but it was better than silence. There were still a few kids playing outside even after the streetlights had come on and some people already had their Christmas decorations outside. Any other time, it would have been a welcome sight to see how peaceful Hawkins could be.

She didn't have any particular destination in mind, but she wasn't exactly surprised when she found herself pulling up outside of the Byers' home about thirty minutes into her drive. The fact that she even remembered where it was was more unexpected than anything.

The house looked calm, the only real indication that anyone was there being Jonathan's car in the driveway. For a moment, a feeling of hope blossomed in her chest. Maybe it was all over already and she had come at just the right moment to be filled in on all of the excitement of the fight and they could all sleep that night.

She pulled her coat closer to her body as she exited the car and walked up to the door. Knocking lightly, she waited for someone to answer before beginning to knock harder.

"Jonathan?" She called out. "Nancy?"

A few seconds went by before the door swung open and Nancy pulled her into the house, looking at her in confusion.

"What are you doing here?" Nancy asked.

"I went for a drive and I just ended up here," she said honestly, looking around at the Christmas lights, the *alphabet* painted on the wall, and the booby trap set up throughout the living room. "It's not over yet, is it?"

"No," Jonathan answered from where he was putting nails into a wooden baseball bat.

“What is that?” She asked tentatively, pulling her coat off and tossing it onto the couch. Usually, she would have asked where she could leave her things when she was over at someone’s house, but it clearly wasn’t time for politeness.

He just lifted the bat up as his answer and she moved forward, taking it from him.

“Do you think this is going to kill it?” She asked, inspecting the sports gear turned weapon. “I have some golf clubs in my trunk. I don’t use them anymore. Do you have duct tape?”

She said all of this without taking much of a breath and looked up to find the other two staring at her.

“What?”

“I thought you didn’t want to be part of this.” Nancy was the first to speak, but she was smiling slightly. “You show up out of nowhere and now you have ideas of how we can kill it.”

“Yeah,” Jacqueline shrugged, handing the bat back to Jonathan and grabbing her car keys from her coat pocket. “Well, maybe I don’t want to run away from this.”

Before either of them could say anything, she walked out of the house and retrieved one of the old golf clubs from her trunk. Before her dad had left, he had been teaching her how to play. They would go to the country club on Saturdays and spend most of the day there. It was one of the few things they did together, but it had been nice for a while. Now, the golf clubs stayed mostly forgotten in her trunk.

Coming back into the house, Jonathan handed over the duct tape and she made her way into the kitchen, finding the biggest kitchen knives she could and taping them onto the handle of the golf club. It wasn’t much, but if they thought that nails could hurt this thing, a few knives should be able to do even more damage.

Nancy and Jonathan were talking in the other room and she could vaguely hear them discuss the plan of how they’d lure it to the house. She peeked through to see them cutting their palms. She shivered at

the sight. She might have been willing to help kill this thing, but it felt stupid to summon the thing to them.

She came back into the living room while they were finishing wrapping their hands and just in time to hear loud banging on the front door. All three of them looked at each other, fearing the worst, but then the person on the other side began shouting.

Steve.

“He can’t be here,” she suddenly whispered toward them as Nancy stood up to go to the door. “Make him leave.”

Nancy opened the door and she told him just that, but he was determined to talk to her and Jonathan. He said he had messed up and wanted to make things right. His words caused Jacqueline to swallow thickly. She understood that feeling and it was a relief to hear that Steve was starting to try to fix the mistakes he’d made. But then he was pushing into the house thinking that Jonathan had been the one to hurt Nancy’s hand.

It was obvious that he was surprised to see her there and she just shook her head at him, stepping forward.

“Jac - what’s going on?”

“She’s right, you need to leave,” she said quickly. His gaze fell to her hand and she lifted them both up, showing him that she was fine. And if she felt anything when he looked at her in concern, she ignored it.

But then Jonathan was rushing to him and grabbing onto his shirt, trying to convince him to leave.

After that, things escalated quickly.

Nancy pulled a *gun* on him and Steve started yelling because, well, he was being held at gunpoint. She told him he had five seconds to get out of the house and Jacqueline didn’t know her that well, but she was sure that Nancy wasn’t bluffing. She could potentially really shoot Steve to get her point across.

When Nancy began her countdown, Jacqueline did her best to try to push him toward the door, but he had always been stubborn. “Go, go, go,” she pleaded repeatedly as Nancy continued to count and then the lights were flickering and Jonathan and Jacqueline both rushed to grab their weapons of choice.

Nancy and Jonathan were back to back in the center of the room, turning in circles trying to find the monster, while Jacqueline kept her eyes moving around. And, Steve, he just kept yelling at Nancy to be careful with the gun and shouting for someone to tell him what was going on.

There was no time for any conversation when the monster appeared on the ceiling and Nancy started to shoot at it. It was the most hideous thing she had ever seen and much worse than what had been in any of her nightmares. She would never be able to sleep again.

“Run! Go, run!” Jonathan yelled out as the thing came down from the ceiling, tugging Nancy and beginning to move out of the room. Jacqueline was right behind them and Jonathan grabbed Steve’s arm, pulling him along.

“Jump!” Jonathan shouted as they ran, Jacqueline jumping and turning her head to make sure that Steve had heard him in time to make it over the bear trap in the middle of the hallway.

The growl the thing let out caused a shout of her own to leave her lips.

Once they were all in the bedroom, Steve continued his freak out and Nancy and Jonathan turned to him, telling him in unison to shut up. Surprisingly it worked and they all stood there, Nancy with her gun, Jonathan with the bat and his lighter ready to take the thing down, and Jacqueline held the golf club out in front of her, eyes trained on the bedroom door.

The monster was getting closer and they could hear its growls as it looked for them.

“What’s it doing?” Nancy asked, voice shaking but clear. Jonathan responded that he didn’t know.

The lights continued to blink and Jacqueline stepped forward a bit before a hand gripped her elbow and pulled her back. She didn't look back at him, but she stopped moving closer to the door, staying behind Nancy and Jonathan instead.

Then silence. Silence and the lights stopped blinking.

"Do you hear anything?" Nancy asked just as Jacqueline whispered, "Is it gone?"

Jonathan put away his lighter and they all crept out of the room to investigate. This time Jacqueline stayed behind Steve as he wouldn't let her out of the room with them at first.

They went back into the living room and the thing was gone. It was just *gone*?

It was quiet as they were tried to figure out what had just happened, but Steve broke through that by muttering "This is crazy" to himself. Suddenly he was yelling it and she winced at the sound. When he picked up the phone, Nancy immediately rushed over, grabbed it from his hand and threw it on the floor.

"What are you doing? What are you doing? Are you insane?" He cried out.

"It's going to come back!" Nancy yelled at him. "So you need to leave. Right. Now."

Steve glanced from Nancy to Jacqueline to Jonathan and back to Nancy before turning toward the door. It was clear he was going to leave, but he turned back for one moment to grab Jacqueline's wrist. His grip was tight, but she was able to pull away from him easily.

"I'm staying." She protested. He looked at her for a moment in disbelief before she shook her head. "Go."

Thankfully, he listened and continued on his way out the door, and just in time too. The lights began to flash again.

And like before, Jonathan and Nancy seemed to unconsciously team up while Jacqueline stood to the side with her golf club dagger

waiting for whatever was going to happen.

The lights continued to go in and out before suddenly it was pitch black in the house. She couldn't see anything in front of her and she let out a soft grunt as she backed into the wall.

"Jonathan!" Nancy called out as the monster growled and pounced on him. All Jacqueline could do as her eyes tried to adjust was hold the golf club out in front of her, but she was afraid that she would hit Nancy or Jonathan with it, so she flipped it around to hold the head out instead. It probably wouldn't do anything to the monster, but she didn't want to stab anyone else.

The lights started to come back on again as Nancy continued to yell out Jonathan's name and suddenly the image in front of her was clearer. This monster had Jonathan on the floor, its large head-mouth thing open and dripping goo onto the boy underneath her. She quickly turned the golf club back around and leaped forward, stabbing its back as Nancy began to shoot it.

But it didn't react, didn't turn or growl or anything to show that it had even felt the knives. It kept moving toward Nancy.

"Go to hell, you son of a bitch!" Nancy yelled out as she expended all of her bullets into it. By then, Nancy had been backed up into the wall and Jacqueline was practically glued to her spot and too far away to try to do anything to help.

Jonathan was still on the floor, so Nancy was going head-to-head with this thing.

Then suddenly Steve was jumping into the room and hitting the thing with the bat Jonathan had made.

Nancy called out his name, but there was no time for any of them to react to him coming back because the monster was going after him and he continually took swings at it. Steve was quick on his feet, thankfully, and was able to push it toward the hallway. The sound of the trap engaging sounded through the room and Steve yelled, "He's in the trap! He's stuck!"

Jacqueline and Jonathan both ran over, Jacqueline moving next to Nancy behind Steve and Jonathan in front to flick his lighter and throw it into the hallway.

The monster burst quickly into flames and they all watched, Jonathan, Steve, and Jacqueline covering their eyes at the brightness of the fire. Jacqueline felt the screech the thing let out all the way in her bones and pulled the neck of her sweater up to cover her mouth and nose from the smoke.

The rest of them were coughing as the smoke dissipated and they were finally able to look into the hallway to see what remained.

“It has to be dead. It has to be,” Jonathan said as they all moved closer to the trap. Thankfully all the Christmas lights began to come back on one by one and they looked normal again.

Jonathan stood in front of them and whispered “Mom?” as he looked around. Then a voice echoed through the room, sounding like someone saying his name. Jacqueline really had no idea what any of that meant, but everything looked okay. It all *felt* okay.

When they made their way outside, they saw the light on the lamp post flicker slowly back into full brightness.

“Where do you think it’s going?” Nancy asked.

“I don’t think that’s the monster.” They all looked to Jonathan for an explanation and, after a brief moment to tell them what was going on, Nancy and Jonathan were rushing to his car, leaving Jacqueline and Steve on the porch.

4. Chapter Four

“Your face looks terrible,” Jacqueline said suddenly, still facing away from Steve as they stood on the Byers’ porch. It was the first time they had been alone in two months. To put it simply, it was strange, and it still hurt. But it never had been easy for her to keep her mouth shut around him.

He was quiet for a moment.

“Believe it or not, your new buddy Jonathan threw the first punch.” There was an edge in his voice she had never heard before. Jealousy? No doubt toward the friendship between Nancy and Jonathan. Even in the small amount of time that Jacqueline had spent with them, she could tell there was something there.

She shook her head at herself before turning to face him. You deserved it, she wanted to say, but instead, she said, “You know you’re bad at fights.”

A small smirk appeared on Steve’s mouth as he ran a hand through his hair.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before.”

“Steve! What happened to your eye?” Jacqueline rushed over to her window, pulling Steve into her room. He groaned as he hit the floor and jumped up quickly. Ninja, her ass. There was a darkening bruise under his left eye and she reached up to cup his cheeks in her hands so she could get a better look.

“Your hands are cold,” he murmured and she pulled them away.

“Sit down,” she demanded. “I’ll get you some ice.”

"No," he said, reaching for her hand. "I'm fine."

Steve sat down at the foot of her bed and she followed, fitting herself next to him. His grip on her hand wasn't tight, but it was firm. It felt nice. At that thought, her throat tightened.

"Who did you get into a fight with?" When Jacqueline looked over at him, his eyes were trained on her face. "Why were you fighting?"

"It was - Andrew was running his mouth and so I shut it for him."

"Did you now?" She asked, glancing pointedly at his eye.

Steve scoffed and rolled his eyes. "So, okay, he may not have a black eye, but he still knows not to talk about you ag-"

"He was talking about me?" She asked quietly. "And you fought him because of it?"

Steve looked at her sheepishly. "Well, yeah. I didn't like what he was saying."

Jacqueline gnawed on her bottom lip and wondered if she even wanted to know what Andrew had said. He was the type of guy who would start rumors about any girl who wouldn't sleep with him. And he had been hitting on her for weeks.

"I couldn't let him talk about you, Jac." Steve was still grasping her hand and she nodded, lifting her free one back up to his face.

Her fingers gingerly slid over the swollen skin.

"Now we know something you're bad at. You can play basketball and swim, but you're bad at fights."

Steve leaned into her hand and she subconsciously licked her lips, dropping her eyes down to his before looking back up at his eyes. The way he was looking at her almost took her breath away. His eyes were suddenly darker than usual and she instinctively leaned into him.

"Jac," he whispered, moving the hand not holding hers to her hip. "Can I tell you something?"

She nodded her head quickly, not trusting herself to say anything. But before he could talk, the front door slammed and her mother was calling for her downstairs.

They quickly pulled apart and she stood up, glancing at him apologetically.

“Hold that thought.”

Standing with him now had become painfully awkward as she could tell that he was remembering the same moment. She didn't find out what he was going to say to her because he was gone when she came back to her room, a bag of frozen peas in hand.

Then the next day had been her fight with Carol.

So much had changed since the last time they were alone.

She turned away from him again.

The silence was tense, but she was thankful that he didn't walk away.

“How did you get involved in all of this?” He asked after a few minutes.

“I guess I needed a hobby,” she said sarcastically. Shrugging her shoulders, she continued, “Nancy called me to help her look for Barb and Will with Jonathan, and I had nothing else to do.”

It sounded like she was being a smartass, and a part of her was, but she was also being completely serious.

“But I didn't know it was going to lead to this. I mean, this is crazy.”

Jacqueline turned around to him as he brought a hand up to rub at the back of his neck and stepped closer to her. That action always did something to her, seeing him so vulnerable and knowing he was still

going to open up.

“Steve,” she rushed out, stopping him in his tracks when she focused on the cut above his eye. “You have to stop getting into fights. Stop lashing out at people.”

There was a pleading tone to her voice and he must have caught on because he looked down in shame.

“Jonathan threw -”

“But you made him. Nancy told me everything you said to him and none of that was okay.”

Jacqueline was briefly proud of herself for telling him what she thought and him for taking it.

Then she stepped forward and suddenly he was wrapping her up in his arms and her fingers clutched his sweater as she began to cry quietly against him. It was like the last few days, months, and last year, and her exhaustion, all caught up with her at once. And he was the only person she'd ever allowed herself to cry in front of.

She was still so mad at him, but god did she love him. Especially when he was like this, so open and willing to listen to her and comfort her when she needed it.

They stood there for what felt like hours but in reality was just a few minutes, him rubbing her back and her trying to regulate her breathing. When she felt like she could talk without crying some more, she tilted her head back and looked up at him.

“I’m not going to be friends with Tommy and Carol anymore,” Steve said, bringing a bright smile to her face.

“That’s good. Nancy is a much better friend than them.”

“And you?” Steve asked.

She tightened her grip on him and nodded.

“We can be friends.”

His eyes flickered from hope to something that looked more like hurt. But then he pulled her back to him and dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“We should go find out where they went. Check the hospital maybe?” If they found Will, it made sense that they would immediately take the boy there.

The ride to the hospital was so quiet and comfortable that she drifted off, only to have Steve wake her up when they arrived.

“Come on, sleepy head,” he said, earning a groan from her even as she pushed herself out of his car. She stumbled a bit and he caught her with a look of concern written on his face.

“When was the last time you slept?” He asked.

“I haven’t slept well since, like, Thursday,” she answered honestly and, that night, instead of dropping her off at her house, Steve insisted that she stay with him to get some sleep.

Once she was well rested enough, they talked about everything that had happened - her fight with Carol, Nancy, and mostly missing her best friend. She didn’t mention her feelings for him, but that was for the best. He had Nancy and, as much as it hurt her, she could tell that he truly did like her. So, she was going to set aside her own feelings for her best friend and a girl who had just lost hers.

And, anyway, she had just gotten him back and that was all she needed in that moment.

She and Nancy didn’t talk much during the next month, but there was an understanding between them that no one else at school could figure out. But while the girl mourned the loss of Barb, at least she could confide in her boyfriend.

Shockingly enough, it was Jonathan who Jacqueline spoke to the

most out of the two. They would often bump into each other at the record store she'd begun to work at to help her mom with bills, or the library. They'd end up talking for awhile about music or books they were reading. He was a lot less angsty now that Will was safe and at home.

She still cared deeply for Steve, and she didn't have any feelings for Jonathan other than friendship, but it was still nice to have someone else to talk to who had been through a similar experience. She could tell that he had a fondness for Nancy. And the way he looked at Jacqueline when she mentioned Steve told her that he knew how she felt.

It was only natural that they would gravitate toward one another. They both needed a friend who they weren't pining after.

Jacqueline spent a modest Christmas with her mom, one unlike any that she had ever had before. Instead of expensive gifts and a huge dinner with their entire family and her dad's business associates, it was just the two of them with a few things to open up and their time spent cooking and talking about school and, of course, her mom's favorite topic of boys. She didn't mention anything about the Demogorgon (that was what Will and his friends were calling it, she had learned) or her complicated relationship with Steve, but it was pleasant all the same.

It was one the best Christmases she had ever had.

She had her best friend back, a couple of new friends who were definitely better than the popular crowd, and her mom seemed happier than she had since her dad had left.

On Christmas Eve, she found a small box laying on the front step. Inside was a gold necklace with two dainty pendants, a moon and a star. It was immediately obvious to her who it was from, so she was stunned when she opened the note tucked inside the box.

Jacqueline,

Thanks for helping us out with everything. You didn't have to do any of it, but I'm glad you were there.

Steve helped me pick this out. He told me you used to have a necklace just like it that you lost.

Hope you like it.

*Merry Christmas,
Nancy*

5. Chapter Five

Summary for the Chapter:

With Will safe and Steve back in her life, 1984 was supposed to be a great year for them all, but Jacqueline was wrong. The drama was just beginning.

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: underage drinking/drunkenness, relationship angst (Steve x Nancy), some language

Fall 1984

“*This* is Jacqueline,” Carol said as she, and whoever she was talking to, approached her. Jacqueline had barely been at her locker for ten seconds before the other girl came up. She’d probably been waiting all morning to corner her. Jacqueline groaned inwardly, grabbing her English textbook and turning around to face Carol, plastering a smile onto her face.

“Carol,” she greeted calmly. The person she had been talking to was a guy she had never seen before at Hawkins High. Attractive, extremely tight jeans, and an air about him that told her right away that he knew he was hot. But she had seen much better hair.

The guy sent her a smirk as he ran his eyes over her body, practically leering at her chest. Jacqueline rolled her eyes to herself. She already hated him.

“Billy Hargrove,” he said as if she had shown any sort of interest.

“Welcome to Hawkins, I guess.” Holding her book with one arm, Jacqueline closed her locker. “I have to get to class.”

“Wait.” Carol smiled and leaned into Billy. “Billy, this is *the* Jacqueline I was telling you about earlier. She used to be cool, but now she hangs out with freaks.”

Jacqueline stepped forward and was so close to giving her ex-friend a piece of her mind when Carol laughed.

“Speaking of, here comes the freak now.”

Despite herself, Jacqueline turned her head to see Jonathan walking over to her. He glanced uneasily at Carol and Billy before focusing on her.

“Hey,” he said in that quiet tone that she had become accustomed to in the last few months.

“Hi!” She responded and quickly grabbed his arm, pulling him away from the locker and down the hall without another word to Carol and Billy.

“What was that about?”

Jacqueline let go of his arm before grabbing a piece of paper out of his hand.

Tina’s Halloween party. *Come and get sheet faced.* She snorted. “Carol was just filling the new guy in on who’s who at Hawkin’s High.” She handed back the flyer. “You going?”

“No. I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Nancy’s trying to talk me into it.”

“Oh, is she?” She teased with a grin, bumping his arm with hers.

She and Jonathan had become much closer after the Demogorgon experience. Even with Steve back in her life, sometimes she still only saw him at school since he was busy with sports and Nancy.

The summer had been great, almost like old times with lazy days spent by Steve’s pool and staying up all night watching movies at her place, and she occasionally showed up at his house in the middle of the night when she couldn’t sleep, but they were just friends. He was with Nancy much more.

So she and Jonathan had settled into a little arrangement. They weren’t dating, but they sometimes went to the movies together and he had shown her how to process pictures. Of course, there were

rumors about them, and that had bothered him in the beginning of the school year, but whatever. She was over caring about that because she had better people in her life.

All in all, it was convenient. It kept them from being lonely at the very least, for the most part.

And it wasn't like she was planning on introducing him to her mother.

It was nice.

Jonathan's feelings for Nancy had only grown stronger over the past year, so much so that he had attempted to push Nancy away. Jacqueline had insisted that wasn't the way to do it, that it would only make things worse, but he had still tried, and evidently failed.

"Maybe you should go," she said softly. "Go hang out with her. She obviously misses you."

"I hate parties." Jonathan sighed and walked away as the bell rang signaling the start of the next period.

When Jacqueline got to her English class, she was relieved to see that the teacher hadn't closed the door yet. He was facing away from the door while he talked to another student, so she snuck in and made her way over to her desk against the wall, right next to Steve.

He tossed a crumpled up flyer onto her desk as soon as she sat down. She unraveled it and smoothed it onto the desktop. There in his handwriting, he had written out a note to her.

Come to Tina's party.

She wrinkled her nose and mouthed, "no."

Steve rolled his eyes before changing them into his best puppy dog ones. Damn him. This time she shook her head as he reached forward and snatched up the paper, writing on it once again.

When it landed on her desk this time, he grinned over at her.

You can dress like that chick from 16 candles.

As she read the note, she muttered a “haha” loud enough for him to hear. If he only knew about her own romantic angst.

“Or the girl from *Flashdance*?” He whispered, leaning over so he was close to her ear. Then he pulled back and winked.

She quickly jotted something on the paper before throwing it at him and purposefully hitting him on the head.

If you shut up, I'll go.

Steve sent her a look of triumph and mimed zipping his lips before giving her a thumbs up. She couldn't help the smile that it brought to her lips, even if she wasn't excited. She hadn't been to a party in over a year.

Ultimately, she had taken Steve's suggestion and dressed up as Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*. She simply had nothing else to throw together before the party. Of course, she had an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt and a pair of black leggings that she paired with grey leg warmers so she wouldn't freeze. The red heels were from her mother's closet. It had taken her over thirty minutes to tease her hair into perfection and, she had to admit, she looked hot.

Evidently, she wasn't the only person appreciating the outfit because she felt eyes on her as soon as she and Jonathan walked into the party. He, in pure Jonathan fashion, had chosen to not dress up. She had ribbed him about it when he came to pick her up, but at least he was getting out. Nancy would be happy about seeing him there, Jacqueline was sure.

Spotting the kitchen, she left Jonathan near the entrance, telling him she'd be right back and made her way over to grab a cup of whatever was in the punch bowl.

"Pure fuel," the guy standing near the kitchen island said, more like slurred, in her direction.

"Great," she replied, pouring her cup full and taking a sip. "Gross." She slowly sipped it and scanned the room for Nancy and Steve. Not seeing them, she started walking back toward the front door to see if Jonathan was still there.

Before she could turn the corner into the entryway, Billy Hargrove was on top of her. He was wearing a leather jacket, open, with nothing on underneath it. That didn't surprise her at all.

"Hey. Jacqueline, right?"

She glanced up at him, taking a larger gulp of the punch. "Yep," she replied, letting her eyes travel the room before looking back at him.

"Nice costume," he said, placing his hand on the wall behind her head. He smirked down at her. "Sexy."

Jacqueline took a deep breath and stared at him, smiling sweetly. "Have you seen Steve?"

The smirk on his face immediately dropped and he watched her with surprisingly hard eyes.

"Why are you searching for him when you've got me right here?" He was immediately back to his smarmy way of trying to flirt. Licking his lips, he leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "Carol told me you used to have a thing with him, for him, whatever. I can show you a better time."

Ice filled her veins for a moment as she thought about Carol telling her deepest secrets to some new guy, but before she could act on them in any way, an arm made its way around her waist and she was being pulled away from Billy. Looking up, she found Steve standing there.

"I was looking for you," she said, relief filling her voice.

Steve took off his sunglasses and glared at Billy over her head. Then his attention fell to her and he took in her costume, the way his eyes

moving over her body feeling completely different from a moment before when Billy had done the same thing. But this was less leering and more appreciating.

“Nice costume, Jac.” He smiled widely at her and tightened his arm around her, guiding her toward the hallway. “Was he bothering you?”

She shrugged and drank the rest of her punch. “Not really. Just hitting on me.” She hoped Steve didn’t hear anything Billy had been saying to her.

They stopped in the hall and he glanced at her cup before removing his arm. She hated herself for immediately missing the contact. He had just been trying to get her away from a jerk and here she was enjoying the way his warm arm felt around her body. Sometimes she had to remind herself that he had a girlfriend, one who was technically her only female friend.

“Where’s Nancy?” She asked suddenly.

“Bathroom. She’s already had a few too many cups of this.” He flicked her cup with his finger. “Be careful.”

“Okay, mom.”

Steve was unimpressed with her attitude but then the song changed and he was pulling her with him to the dance floor.

She hadn’t come to the party to dance, ironic given the costume, but it was hard to resist when Steve was there pressed up against her due to all the people in the living room. A few minutes into dancing, she spotted Nancy making her way through the crowd, cup in hand. She was walking a little wobbly.

“Jacqueline!” She yelled over the music. “I’m so happy you came!” Before she knew what was happening, Nancy was hugging her and Jacqueline laughed. Wow, this girl had never before been that excited to see her.

“You look cute,” Jacqueline replied, pulling away to get better see her costume. The white blouse really complimented her. “Lana suits

you.”

“So do you.” Nancy grinned as she took a sip of the red concoction. “Steve’s idea?”

She could feel Steve’s gaze and the heat from his body on her as she and Nancy spoke. Instantly uncomfortable, she backed up into his chest and tilted her head back to look at him. There had to be a way out of this situation before it got to be too much.

“I’m getting a drink,” she shouted. “And I need to find Jonathan.”

Nancy perked up at that at the same time as Steve shook his head and started to say something about the alcohol, but she was already rushing off. After she filled her second cup, she made her way out to the backyard. Taking a deep breath, she leaned against the banister and watched the action around her. There was a keg out there and a crowd of people gathered around it as someone was doing a kegstand.

There was some sort of commotion going on inside, but as she turned to find out what it was, Tommy and Billy were passing by her.

Billy stopped in his tracks and grinned at her, nudging Tommy to get him to stop as well.

“See you’re alone again. Where’d your boy run off to?”

For a second she wondered if he meant Steve or Jonathan before he was stepping closer to her. He was so close to her now that she could smell the beer on his breath.

Scrunching up her nose, she averted her gaze and looked over at Tommy. He rolled his eyes and played with the shoulder of her shirt. She slapped his hand away. He always got handsy when he was drinking, but she would be damned if Carol caught wind of his actions.

“Why do you care?” She asked Billy. He threw up his hands defensively, a little beer sloshing out of the cup he was holding.

“Hey, just trying to figure out this town, get to know people.”

“Right. Well, it sounds like Carol has already filled you in on everything.”

As soon as the words were out of her lips, she turned and went back into the house to search for Jonathan. She felt bad for leaving him alone, especially when she had promised to stick with him so they wouldn't be the awkward third and fourth wheels to Nancy and Steve. Putting her cup down on the kitchen counter, she rounded the corner and nearly bumped into him.

Jonathan's face was flushed and she had never before seen him like this, at least not since his little brother went missing. There was concern on his face and bewilderment in his eyes.

“What's going on?”

He looked like he had only just seen her for the first time that night when he gazed down at her. Her words snapped him out of his stupor.

“Nancy's drunk. She's in the bathroom. Won't let me in, but Steve left.”

“He *left*?” She asked, confusion lacing her voice. She looked toward the front door like he would still be there, but it was already closed.

Jonathan was nodding. “Yeah. He asked if we would take her home.”

Jacqueline was still trying to figure out why Steve would leave in the middle of a party. Because Nancy was drunk? Surely there was a better reason than that.

“What did he say?”

“That was it.” Jonathan shrugged and started leading her toward the bathroom. “He seemed upset, though.”

Once Nancy let Jacqueline into the bathroom, she filled her in on all of the details of her possible break up with Steve. She was still drunk

and parts of what she was saying were difficult to make out, but what Jacqueline gathered was that Steve had unintentionally caused her to spill her drink on herself. This had somehow led to an argument in the bathroom where Nancy told him their entire relationship, and that Steve, was bullshit.

Jacqueline's eyes widened at this and her mouth opened as she tried to figure out what to say. It was completely unlike the Nancy that she had come to know. Sure, the girl had always been surprisingly open in her assessment of other people, but everyone had thought them to be completely, irrevocably in love.

"Nancy," Jacqueline started softly, treading carefully, as she leaned against the sink. "Did you mean that?"

It was a stupid question, but she had to know what was going on.

Now it was Nancy's turn to look like a fish, her mouth opening and closing a few times before she nodded her head. Jacqueline's breath left her chest in one quick exhale. This was an extremely awkward situation and she had no idea what to do. Comfort the girl in front of her or go and find Steve and comfort him?

But Steve wasn't there, so she leaned forward and placed a hand on Nancy's shoulder. They stood like that for a long, tense moment before she finally decided to just go for it and wrapped her arm around the girl in a half-hug.

"Hey, Jonathan's going to take you home, okay?" She asked gently, pulling back to observe Nancy. Her eyes were closed but she nodded and allowed Jacqueline to reach around her to unlock the bathroom door.

Jonathan was opening it as soon as the click sounded and she turned Nancy around toward him.

"You go take her home. I'm - I'm going to stick around here."

Jonathan mouthed, "you sure?" before she nodded and walked around the pair.

It had been a long time since she'd enjoyed a party, but right now she

thought it would be for the best if she stayed somewhere it was too loud to listen to herself think. Or do something stupid like go after her best friend when he had just potentially been dumped by the girl he loved.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she muttered to herself, heading to the kitchen for another cup of pure fuel.

6. Chapter Six

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: underage drinking/drunkenness, relationship angst, threats of sexual assault (it does not happen), mild body horror, strange things

It turned out, staying at the party was the dumbest decision Jacqueline could have ever made.

Sure, she was able to drown her emotions for a little while, which was also not the smartest thing she'd ever done after almost a year of trying to move on from them, but somewhere between cups five and six or seven of the mixed drink, she'd forgotten where she was or who was around.

Somehow she ended up pressed up against Billy Hargrove's Camaro, his hips holding her tight to the metal. If it wasn't for his hands, she was sure she would have frozen to death from the cold air biting through her leggings. She couldn't even figure out how they'd made it out to his car, or why she was with him in the first place, but she couldn't lie; he was a damn good kisser and an even better diversion.

It was only when he pulled back, one hand moving to open the car door, that she snapped out of it.

"Wait," she said, squeezing her eyes shut, hoping that she would be able to see clearly when she opened them. Opening them up, she found that her vision was still a little blurry. And Billy was still there, lips red and swollen, his thumb rubbing very distractingly on her hip. "I need to go home."

She couldn't meet his eyes as the words slipped out of her mouth, not sure what she would find there. He hadn't even been in town that long and she could already tell that he was a bit of a hot head.

But what he said shocked her.

"Yeah, I'll take you home." And he said it so nicely, his voice barely a

whisper in her ear, that she found herself nodding as he opened the passenger door. When she was seated in the car, she sighed and tilted her head back against the seat.

Billy was in the car in no time, the sound of the car door slamming causing her to glance up in alarm.

He didn't ask for directions as he started the ignition and sped down the street. Music blared from his speakers and he leaned forward to turn the volume down before glancing over at her.

"You okay over there? Think you can stay awake?" He asked. She paused as she tried to make out his question.

"Stay awake? Oh, yeah, yeah, I'm good." Jacqueline forced her eyes open wider and looked over at him, causing a smirk to form on his lips. Instead of saying anything else, he just reached over across the center console and placed a hand high on her thigh in response. The touch was almost enough to soothe her to sleep, but she was trying to remember where she lived, so she reached down and pushed his hand away.

"Turn... here," she trailed off as he sped past the street that would take them closer to her house. "Or take the next right."

He ignored her and simply moved his hand back over to her, this time placing it on the back of her neck, running his fingers along the skin and into her hair.

"Billy, stop," she said firmly, letting her eyes meet his.

He groaned and actually did as she requested, moving his hand back to the steering wheel. For a second she thought he was just going to turn around and take her home, but then he slapped the wheel. The sound echoed in the car and she jumped slightly.

"What's your deal? You still want Harrington or something?" He growled in her direction.

Steve's name caused something to snap inside her and she turned in the seat, just realizing that she wasn't even wearing a seatbelt.

“Stop. The. Car.”

And just like that, he slammed on the brake, both of their bodies being thrown forward and back.

“Shit, Billy!” She shouted, not truly expecting him to do it. But she needed to get out his car. She pushed the door open and practically fell onto the pavement, righting herself onto her heels. She turned to glare at him through the window, but he was pulling away before she could even get a word out.

“Jerk,” she murmured to herself, looking around at the street signs. It was well past midnight at that point and there was no one outside. Most of the houses around were pitch black and the only light helping her out was from the streetlights. She sighed and started walking in the direction they had just come from, stopping a few minutes into her trek to remove her shoes. “Stupid shoes.”

Even in her alcohol-addled mind, she couldn’t help but remember the time a year ago that she had drunkenly walked home alone. Groaning, she vowed to never drink again.

When Jacqueline woke up the next morning, she was relieved to find herself in her own bed. She still had on her costume and the worst headache imaginable, but at least no one else was there. Bits and pieces of the night before came back to her and she shot up in bed quickly.

The action caused her stomach to lurch and she jumped out of her bed, sprinting to the bathroom and falling to her knees. Thankfully she made it to the toilet just in time.

She had made out with Billy.

What was she thinking? Not much evidently.

Maybe she could skip school. Her mom had already left for work if the deafening silence in the house was any indication. But she had learned long ago that you never refuse to show up after something embarrassing happened. It only made things worse.

Plus, she needed to check on Steve and Nancy.

If she was lucky, no one would be talking about what happened to her and Billy during the party. She could pretend it never happened.

Arriving at school just before the bell had been a strategy for her when she was trying to avoid Steve and Carol. Unfortunately, it didn't work out so well for her this time.

As soon as she reached her locker, Steve was walking up. "Why didn't you leave with Jonathan?" He asked in lieu of a greeting. How did he even *know* that?

She glanced at him and frowned. His eyes were a little puffy, but otherwise, there was no sign of anything being wrong. Other than the hard stare he had fixed on her face.

"I wanted to have fun?" Her answer came out as more of a question than she intended, but Steve wasn't having it.

"You should have left with him. Something bad could've happened."

"Yeah, I know," she replied darkly, turning her head and staring blankly into her locker as she remembered the episode in Billy's car. She couldn't be sure what he'd had on his mind, but she knew that he made her feel unsafe. It caused a shiver to run down her spine and suddenly Steve was even closer to her than before.

"How'd you get home?"

"Steve." She sighed. "What's with the third degree?"

He ignored her question and pressed on. "Did someone drive you?"

"I walked," she answered after a moment's hesitation.

And Steve immediately exploded.

"You walked?" He exclaimed, his eyes going comically wide and arms going out in exasperation, voice resonating in the hallway.

"It was only a couple blocks," she said quickly.

Steve ran a hand through his hair. The worry on his face was evident and it made her feel terrible for being the reason for it.

“Shit, Jac.” He lowered his voice, now soft eyes meeting hers. “You know what’s out there. I should’ve taken you home.” He shook his head before she had time to even open her mouth. “Or I’ll kill Byers. Why would he just leave you there?”

“Come on, it’s not Jonathan’s fault. I wanted to stay.”

She shut her locker, books momentarily forgotten and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Steve, I’m fine. I’m all in one piece.”

There was no way she would be mentioning that she had been in Billy’s car, or that he had left her in the middle of the street, drunk, late at night.

Her best friend sighed and nodded, closing his eyes for a second. She took the opportunity to change the subject.

“Are you okay?” She asked, voice low and private. Her hand was still on his shoulder, but Steve hadn’t moved away from her, so she just left it there.

When his eyes opened, the emotion in them broke her heart. This boy was completely wrecked with worry and heartbreak. She hated how well she could relate.

Steve shook his head.

“No.” It was like that one word took everything out him because he leaned closer to her and tilted his head back. “She said everything was bullshit, our entire relationship and me.” The words were barely audible, but after talking to Nancy the night before, she already knew what he was upset about.

“I’m really sorry, Steve,” she whispered, letting her hand move from his shoulder down his arm and to his hand. It would probably seem weird if anyone saw them standing in the hallway hand in hand, but right now she didn’t care. She was just going to be there for him.

“Have you talked to her?”

His silence was answer enough.

“You should. People say and do stupid things when they’re drunk.”

Even though Nancy had confirmed for her that she didn’t love Steve, Jacqueline knew that at one time she had, and they needed to talk before Steve shut down or, worse, went back to his King Steve demeanor.

The glare he gave her showed her that he didn’t believe that, but she continued.

“Really, you can’t just walk away and push her away. You need to find out what she wants.”

It was ridiculous that she was standing there, holding the hand of the guy she had loved for the last couple of years, and trying to tell him to talk to his girlfriend about their relationship.

“What about what I want?” Steve asked.

His eyes changed from hurt to intense and so full of longing that it almost took her breath away. She wasn’t used to someone looking at her in that way and knowing that it was for another girl was like a slap in the face. It was obvious in that one expression how in love he was and how torn he was in this situation. She knew he had never been rejected before.

“Steve.” Jacqueline lowered her eyes to the linoleum as she spoke. “You have to accept what she wants.”

By the end of the day, Jacqueline hadn’t seen Steve again. The only time she ever saw Nancy at school was between classes and the girl was typically rushing off to class or talking to Steve, so it was no surprise when she only awkwardly waved and hurried down the hall to her next period.

The one person she did, unfortunately, bump into was Billy. She was on her way to the parking lot when she passed by the gym.

“Jacqueline,” he said from behind her as she sped up to avoid him. He caught up with her in just a few strides and stepped up next to her. Determined to get to her car and then to the comfort of home, she continued to walk without reacting to his presence. “Hey, stop acting so weird.” He actually had the audacity to sound offended. “You weren’t the only girl I hooked up with last night. Not a big deal.”

At those words, his nonchalance, the way he completely disregarded what happened in his car, she rounded on him.

“What did you say?”

“Are you jealous that you weren’t the only one?” He asked, amusement lacing his voice.

“Not that,” she hissed. “Did you forget that you left me stranded?”

“Hey, you asked for that.” He pointed at her accusingly and laughed, this low, maniacal laugh. Before she could stop herself, her hand came up and she slapped him across the face.

They both stood there shocked by her action, her hand stinging, but she just squared her shoulders and met his hard gaze with one of her own.

“Never talk to me again,” she muttered to him, hands clenched into fists next to her body.

And just like that he snapped out of it and looked at her as if she had just given him a challenge.

“Don’t worry, it can be our little secret,” he said with a smirk. “I’ll just keep Harrington on his toes.”

With a wink, he turned and walked into the gym, that ugly smirk still on his face. Only then did she allow herself to relax. When her heart rate had settled back to normal, she let out a huff and made her way to her car.

She felt like things were about to get worse.

Between Steve and Nancy's falling out, her feelings for Steve coming back to hurt her all over again, and Billy being a total dick, Jacqueline needed to find something to do to take her mind off of things. Preferably an activity that didn't involve alcohol. She played around with the idea of calling Jonathan and trying to get him to hang out with her, but she figured he was going through some of his own issues regarding Steve and Nancy, so the library was her best option. She definitely wouldn't bump into any of the guys causing her grief.

As she pulled into a parking spot and got out of her car, she was starting to feel more relaxed. She was going to find a book or twenty to throw herself into and settle into one of the oversized leather chairs in the back of the library. It was comforting, the scent of paper and the soft sound of typewriters already helping to calm her mind. Walking down a random aisle, not focusing too much on the titles of the books, more searching for a spine that called to her, she stopped when she heard an outburst from the checkout counter.

"I need my paddles!" When she turned, she spotted a curly haired boy running out of the doors, a stack of books in his hands. Snickering, she continued on her way, finally grabbing a book and heading toward the back.

Hours went by and she was so engrossed in the book that she hadn't noticed as people began to leave the library and most of the lights were turned off. It wasn't until the librarian herself came over and gently caught her attention. She jumped and the lady smiled apologetically.

"It's time to close, dear," she said nicely and Jacqueline nodded, standing up and stretching. She smiled at the librarian and lifted up the book.

"I'd like to check this out."

After checking out the book, she left and decided to go for a short walk around town square instead of immediately going home. She was feeling much better, her mind having stopped racing with thoughts of what she could have done and what was going to happen with her friends, but she needed to stretch her legs a bit.

There were still people around, so if Steve ever found out about this walk, there would be no reason for him to be too upset with her. Surely venturing around town wasn't that dangerous.

With the book in the crook of her arm, keys dangling from a finger, Jacqueline walked for a few blocks until there was no one else around again. She had begun to move back in the direction of her car when she heard a growl behind her.

It had to be a dog.

That thought didn't stop her from freezing in her steps and whipping her head around, looking for any sign of an animal.

Nothing.

She had taken a few more steps, falling back into her rhythm, when she heard it again. She froze.

She would recognize that sound anywhere. It had been in her dreams for almost the last year and it was distinct and it couldn't be happening again.

No. No, no, no.

It had to be her imagination playing tricks on her. After what Steve had said to her, reminding her of what was out there, it was just her mind messing with her.

She needed to get home so she could go to sleep and get herself under control. Speeding up, she took off in a jog and was almost to her car when her car keys slipped out of her hand.

"Dammit," she muttered to herself, bending down to grab them. As soon as she reached the cold metal, fingers wrapping around the keychain, a large and unearthly feeling claw curved around her ankle and pulled her roughly.

Jacqueline screamed in surprise, the book falling out of her grasp and fingers scraping against the pavement. She tried her hardest to catch the light pole, falling forward and hitting her chest against the sidewalk, fingernails digging into a crack. A strangled cry escaped

from her throat as the creature jerked her harder and a fingernail was ripped from her finger.

7. Chapter Seven

Summary for the Chapter:

Unable to reach Jacqueline, Steve's protective mode is activated.

Notes for the Chapter:

Welcome to Steve's POV. It's time to delve into his feelings and side of things as the story continues.

Basketball used to be Steve's favorite way to let off steam, but it was going to take a lot more than a sport with this Nancy drama. She didn't love him? He was *bullshit*?

To say her words had completely rocked him to the core would be an understatement. God, he thought they were good, perfect even. Everything had been going so well for him before she'd dropped that bomb on him. On top of it all, the only person he could talk to about it was Jacqueline and that was another issue altogether.

He loved Nancy, he was sure of it, so much so that he wanted to stay in Hawkins to keep an eye on her, but now he didn't understand what the hell was going on anymore. And, despite how much he tried to ignore it, there was this gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach anytime he so much as saw his best friend. It had been there for years, but it had gone from butterflies to something resembling guilt and back. Jacqueline didn't talk about her after high school plans much, especially with her dad leaving and taking away any way to help pay for college, but he knew that she would want to get out of Hawkins. So he tended to ignore that most of the time, too.

It felt like everything was going to shit for him.

And he couldn't even practice now without Billy Hargrove's taunts in his ears.

"King Steve, they used to call you, huh? Then you turned bitch."

Steve took a breath, trying to keep the ball away from Billy and also

keep his cool at the same time. Carol and Tommy, no doubt, had told this new guy all about him.

“Hey, maybe you should just shut up and play the game,” he said over his shoulder.

Like that, the guy was moving around him, stealing the ball from him and causing him fall to the floor in the process. Pushing himself up, Steve ran as fast as he could across the court, but by then Billy had made the shot and scored. Then he turned toward him like an animal stalking its prey.

What the fuck was this guy’s deal?

Steve stood there trying to catch his breath while staring right back at Billy when he heard Nancy behind him. Perfect timing.

They walked in silence outside to the space between the gym and another building. It was one of the places that had kind of become their spot during breaks from practice, but the tension now was too thick to be as comfortable as it usually felt.

“What are you doing here?” He asked a little harsher than he should have. Sure, Jacqueline told him to talk to Nancy, but that didn’t mean he was ready to do it right then and there. He wasn’t ready for this conversation.

“What do you think? Where were you this morning? I missed first period.”

“Figured Jonathan would take you.” There was an accusing tone in his voice and he could have punched himself for being like that, but he was hurt, dammit.

“What are you talking about?” She asked, looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Jesus, you really can’t handle your alcohol.”

Of course, she didn’t remember, but that didn’t make any difference. The words had still come out of her mouth. When he asked her what she remembered, the fact that she truly thought that he was mad

because of the drinking upset him even more. Plus, she thought he had taken her home.

“That was your other boyfriend. That was Jonathan,” he said, and from there, he was pretty much done with the conversation. But she didn’t understand. “It’s pretty simple, Nancy. You were just telling it like it is.”

The rest of the conversation was mostly him reminding her of words, her accusing them of killing Barb, him not caring about it, their relationship being bullshit, and him being bullshit. And, oh yeah, she didn’t love him. Throughout their entire relationship, other than right before the Demogorgon situation, he had never been so angry with her. Now, though, with her saying she didn’t remember any of it and that meant it was all false, he felt them begin to shatter right there.

“Then tell me,” he demanded.

“Tell you what?”

“You love me.” He was practically pleading.

She stared at him for a moment, all defiant and like there was no reason to give him that. Just one time.

His teammate came out to get him back to the gym because apparently none of the team could deal with Billy on the court, but he kept his eyes on her. One more time, that was all he needed. They could go back to how normal, or start over.

Nancy glanced down at the ground and then lifted her head, meeting his eyes with unsure and sad ones.

That was his answer.

He moved to walk away, but not before saying, “I think that you’re bullshit.”

It was obvious that Nancy wanted nothing more to do with him, and according to Jacqueline, he had to accept whatever Nancy wanted. He couldn’t force her to want him or their relationship, but it sucked.

All he wanted to do right now was talk to Jacqueline.

He picked up the phone and dialed her number and her mom answered on the second ring.

“Hello, Steve,” she replied after he told her who was calling. “Jackie isn’t home yet. Maybe you can call back in a little while.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Hanging up the phone, he fell back onto his bed with a sigh and ran a hand down his face.

Finally, he forced himself off the bed and spent the rest of his night focusing on his schoolwork and the essay that Nancy also thought was bullshit.

Jacqueline didn’t show up at school the next day, and Steve was immediately worried. He tried to call when he got home from school, but after the fifth time, he decided he had been patient enough. Plus, after the stunt she had pulled walking home by herself from Tina’s party, he couldn’t help but feel that something was going on with her. There had been other instances of her being a bit reckless when it came to her safety, if her coming over in the middle of the night and getting involved in the entire Demogorgon mess was any indication, so he felt it was necessary that he just go check on her.

There wasn’t a car in the driveway when he arrived, but that wasn’t out of the ordinary. She often shared the car with her mom these days, so maybe her mom was out.

Making his way to the front door, Steve felt a swell of nerves in his stomach. There was a voice in the back of his mind, one that almost sounded like Jacqueline’s, telling him that something was up.

He knocked on the door and waited. It didn’t take long for Mrs. Cooper to answer the door and she smiled tiredly at him. She looked like she’d just come in from work judging by her dress and makeup.

“Hi, Mrs. Cooper. Um, is Jacqueline home?” He asked, glancing back at the empty driveway. When he turned back at her, Jacqueline’s

mom looked at him in confusion.

“No, honey. She hasn’t come home from school yet. I thought she may be with you.”

“She di-” He stopped himself, hoping that the woman couldn’t see any panic in his eyes. “Right. No, s-she wasn’t with me, but maybe she went to Nancy’s after school.”

His voice was a little higher than usual as he tried to figure out the right words to say, but he knew he needed to get out of there quickly, so he lifted his keys in his hand.

“Thanks, Mrs. Cooper! Tell her I came by when she gets home?” He asked, turning quickly and jogging to his car. He was in his car and driving down the street before she even got the front door closed.

Something was definitely going on.

He didn’t really have many choices; he could call Nancy and Jonathan and see if they knew where she was, but that in itself was going to be weird. But it had to be done, for Jacqueline, so he found a pay phone in town and dialed Nancy’s number from memory. The line was busy, so he hung up with a groan before searching through his wallet for any slip of paper that might have Jonathan’s number on it. Nothing.

What else could he do? She didn’t have any other friends, so all of his options had been used. The last thing he could think to do was go to Hopper, even if the thought of already being on his last resort caused even more panic.

The police station was close by so he just walked over and right in, past the first room before backing himself up. His breathing was heavier by then as each second ticked by.

“Um, Hopper?” He asked from the hallway, pushing his hands into his pockets when the Chief looked up from his desk. His eyebrows immediately rose. But he must have seen the worry in Steve’s face because he was up and out into the hallway in no time.

“What’s wrong?” He asked in a whisper, pulling the younger boy

down to another room. "Is it Will?"

Steve furrowed his brows but shook his head.

"No. It's, um, Jacqueline. My friend, Jacqueline." He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair, his nerves starting to get the best of him. "She didn't come to school today, but her mom said she never came home from school. I can't find her."

Looking up at Hopper with wide eyes, he found the Chief standing there obviously thinking about something and then he looked down at him.

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

Steve paused but then shook his head.

"Are there any friends she could be with?"

"I already said I can't find her!" He was getting louder and had to stop to breathe before lowering his voice. "No, she doesn't have many. She's not with me, so I don't know where else she could be."

He stared at the taller man hoping that he would get the picture.

"It's already dark. If she's not home by now -" Steve trailed off.

Hopper seemed to get it then, nodding his head and leaving the room, coming back with a file. He opened it up and handed over a picture. It was a polaroid of car keys, the keychain a wooden C.

"Are these hers?"

"Yeah," Steve pushed his hand roughly through his hair once again and muttered a string of curses under his breath.

This couldn't be happening. No way was she missing. No, she was going to call him later and tell him she was just playing a joke. It was out of character for her, and he would be pissed at her, but she'd be okay.

"Come with me," Hopper said, leading him down the hall and out the

door where they walked over to his truck. The doors were already unlocked, so they got in quietly and neither of them said anything until they were out on the road.

“Where’d you get those?” Steve asked, looking over at Hopper.

“Someone found the keys this morning, that and a book from the library, on their way to work, and the librarian called me. Let’s see if we can find the car and go from there.” Hopper glanced at him and his tone softened. “It hasn’t been long since you’ve seen her, right? Now we know whose keys they are. So we’re doing good.”

It was obvious to Steve that he was trying to reassure him, but they both knew what was out there so he couldn’t help interrupting the optimism.

“She’s missing.”

“I can’t put in a missing person’s report for a few more hours, at the least, so right now, I need you to breathe and help me out.” Hopper looked over at him and asked, “Okay?”

Steve nodded in response, shutting his eyes and thinking about the last time he saw her. He was freaking out over her walking home alone and Nancy, but she had seemed okay. He hadn’t seen her much after that because he had tried to avoid everyone for the rest of the day, so he couldn’t even be sure that she had been there all day. Was she sick? God, why hadn’t he noticed?

“Do you think she went to the pharmacy? I mean, I didn’t see her at school yesterday except in the morning. She could’ve left early.”

“The librarian confirmed that she saw her yesterday and she had to tell her to leave when it was time to close. But she could have gone to the pharmacy before that. We’ll check.”

Hopper was speaking slowly, always taking a moment before he began to answer Steve’s suggestions, and Steve couldn’t help but feel like he was just trying to keep him from going crazy. Like he knew that this wasn’t a good situation. They both knew.

Once they got into town, they went and talked to the librarian, who told them everything Hopper had already told him. Jacqueline had come sometime after school, she was there for a couple of hours, and the librarian herself had to tell her to go.

“Miss Cooper comes in here sometimes, not as much as she used to, but she was here for a while. The book she picked wasn’t her usual.”

“What do you mean?” Hopper asked, leaning his elbow on the counter as the librarian went through the checkout cards. She pulled one out and slid it across to him.

Steve read it and shrugged. “What does a book about a rabid dog have to do with anything?” He was tired and his tone of voice showed it.

The librarian looked slightly offended as she assessed him. “Before last year or so, Miss Cooper was checking out Judy Blume or the Sweet Dreams books, Lois Duncan was the darkest author she ever asked about.”

Steve had no idea what any of that meant, so he shook his head. “Whatever. Did she say anything to you?” He asked, earning an elbow from Hopper.

“What he’s trying to say is, was there anything else off about her?”

“She didn’t say much, but she seemed distracted. When I went to tell her it was time to leave, I think I scared her.”

After they left the library, Hopper left him outside to go into the pharmacy by himself. Something about not raising any more suspicion. The pharmacist hadn’t seen her, though, so they walked up and down the street for a few minutes before Steve spotted her car. He ran across the street to it, ignoring the honks of a few cars, and waved Hopper over.

“This is the car. Where’re the keys?”

He held out his hand and waited for Hopper to hand them over. Unlocking the car, Steve occupied himself with checking the inside and then the trunk. When he didn’t find anything he thought would

be of use, he closed the trunk and collapsed against the car.

“It looks like it always does. Ridiculously clean and her books are still in the backseat.”

The two looked at each other now, both knowing what the implications were. Hopper moved closer to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing just enough to get his attention. When Steve tilted his head up, he frowned at the older man.

“What if that thing got her?” He asked, his voice breaking a bit at the end of his question.

“Then we’ll do what we did last time. We got Will back; we can find Jacqueline, too.”

8. Chapter Eight

Notes for the Chapter:

Diving a little deeper into Steve's S2 plot and how that fits in here.

Hopper had tried to assure him that he would take over the details of searching for Jacqueline, going to her mom himself for starters. But Steve still needed to do something. Sure, Hopper had told him to go home and not do anything rash, but he went over to the Wheeler's house to fill Nancy in on everything.

Pulling up to the curb, he began going over what to tell her. Nancy wouldn't take it well after everything with Barb, he was sure of it. Maybe she thought he was bullshit, but Jacqueline was missing and that was all that mattered. And he was getting her back, one way or another.

He was walking to the door when Mike's friends, Dustin, he thought it was, walked across the yard with his own panicked expression on his face.

"Are you here to talk to Mr. or Mrs. Wheeler?" He asked.

Steve screwed up his face and said, "No."

"Good." Grabbing his arm, the kid began trying to pull him toward the car. "Nancy isn't home."

"Where is she?"

"Doesn't matter. We have bigger problems than your love life," Dustin said, dropping his arm and walking over to Steve's car.

"This isn't about my love life, okay?" Steve started back to the door, despite Dustin telling him that Nancy wasn't even there, when Dustin spoke up behind him, making him pause.

"You still have that bat?" That got his attention. Why would this kid need that bat?

Turning, he looked at Dustin. "What bat?" He said slowly.

"The one with the nails," Dustin said, pretending to swing the bat. The kid was unimpressed with him, but Steve trailed after him.

"Why?"

Dustin opened the passenger door of Steve's car and replied, "I'll explain it on the way," before settling himself into the seat.

Well, Steve had no other choice but to see what was going on, not with the kid taking his car hostage. Getting into the car, he waited for the kid to tell him where to drive.

"This better be good," he said as he drove. "I'm not kidding."

The way Dustin told the story, he had found a demon lizard-slug thing and he'd kept as a pet but then it got loose. But now he was sure that it was an interdimensional creature. Steve had seen the Demogorgon, fought the Demogorgon, and knew that his best friend had probably been taken by it, yet there was still a little doubt in his mind about this lizard thing being a big deal. This kid was letting his imagination go wild.

And he didn't have time, Jacqueline didn't have time, for him to involve himself in this if it wasn't a big deal.

Dustin was immediately defensive, swearing that it wasn't just a regular lizard. Because apparently the thing's face had opened up and it ate his cat.

Fair point.

"If its face opened up, does that mean?" Steve started, trying to keep his eyes on the road in front of him as his mind raced. If its face opened up, did that make it like a baby Demogorgon? He was silent for the rest of the drive until they pulled up to the Henderson house.

Meeting Dustin at the back of the car, Steve opened up the trunk and tossed his keys to the younger teen. He reached in and grabbed the nail-filled bat. It had been almost a year since he'd held the thing, but

he couldn't deny that it filled him with some adrenaline. Whatever this thing was that Dustin had trapped in his cellar, it was going down.

Stepping up to the cellar, he listened. It was dark out and the only sounds were of some owls in the distance and his and Dustin's breathing.

"I don't hear shit," he said.

Steve hit the handle of the cellar door with the bat and when that didn't result in any sound, he slammed the bat onto the door. Again, nothing. He didn't have time for this.

"Alright, listen, kid. I swear if this is some sort of Halloween prank, you're dead," Steve said after turning toward him, flashlight trained on Dustin's face. "Alright?"

He couldn't help but get irritable at the thought that he had lost daylight and time looking for Jacqueline. But Dustin swore it wasn't a prank, and he sounded sincere, so Steve asked him for the key to the cellar doors.

Honestly, he didn't want to go down there himself, especially if this lizard or baby Demogorgon or whatever the hell it was could be down there. There was still some doubt in his mind that this was real. But he went down anyway, while Dustin stayed on the ground ("In case he tries to escape," the boy said).

"God, you have no idea what kind of hell you're in for if this thing isn't down here," Steve muttered, more to himself than Dustin.

The cellar was darker than he expected as he walked down the steps and to the floor, shining the flashlight on the wall and floor around. The shadows appeared like they were going to devour him, but otherwise, it looked like any other cellar. Finding the light hanging from the ceiling, he pulled the string and turned it on, looking right down into a puddle of goo.

Shit.

He lifted it up with the bat and looked at it. Yeah, he'd seem

something very close to that before. Lowering the bat, he looked around again until his eyes fell on a huge hole in the wall, leading into the dirt around the cellar.

“Steve? What’s going on down there?” He heard Dustin say from the entrance and he moved over, flashing the light up.

“Get down here.”

He showed Dustin the goo, or skin or whatever, and the huge hole in the wall.

“Oh, shit,” Dustin said.

“Yeah. Exactly.” Steve sighed and glanced over at his new partner. “Come on, we need to talk.”

“So, wait,” Dustin began. “Your friend is missing and you’re just now mentioning it?”

“I didn’t know if you were lying about the lizard!”

“Why would I lie about Dart?” Dustin asked, almost sounding hurt.

“Dart? You named it.” Steve laughed humorlessly and shook his head, hands tight on the wheel of the car. “Look, this could lead to her. I mean, if this is a demo-whatever, and she’s been taken by one, that means it’s connected.”

He shrugged. It made sense to him.

Dustin nodded in agreement. “It could be, yeah. It’s obvious that Dart is trying to get somewhere as he grows, right? So we need to find Dart and maybe he’ll lead us to wherever he is trying to get to.”

The kid was definitely smarter than him. Steve had just been thinking about killing it, but that wasn’t exactly the best way to find Jacqueline, now that he thought about it.

“How are we gonna do that? How do you trap this... Dart?”

“Meat,” Dustin said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Right,” Steve agreed. “Meat. Because it wants to eat people.” That idea alone caused a shiver to run down his spine and he slammed his hands onto the steering wheel. “Shit!”

The outburst caused Dustin to jump slightly and Steve looked at him before sighing.

“Sorry. I just - I have to find her.”

For a moment, Dustin watched him as he drove before saying lightly, “Tell me about her.”

He started with the day they met.

The first day of seventh grade and Steve was not nervous. His mom was freaking out about her baby growing up and constantly fussing over him. It was exhausting. She insisted that she would take him all the way to his class even though he insisted to her that he would be fine walking in by himself. Anyway, Tommy was going to be there and they'd probably end up in the same homeroom anyway since they both had H last names. So he was going to be fine. Finally, after he made that argument on the way to the school, she let him go by himself, but she was definitely staring the entire time he was walking up to the entrance.

And, yeah, it was a little overwhelming in the hallway with everyone else trying to find out their schedule, but he was a man. He found the table with a 7 and A - H sign on it, and once he got his schedule, he was ready to find the classroom.

That was where his trouble started, but, really, he could do it.

He was walking toward the classroom or the direction he thought it was in when he bumped into a girl in the hallway. She fell down with a hump and her bag fell off her shoulder and onto the floor.

“Sorry,” he muttered, looking down and reaching a hand out automatically. She stared at him before taking his hand and he pulled her up, letting go immediately. “Didn’t see you.”

"Yeah, I got that," she said with a laugh before bending down to pick up her bag and her schedule. He couldn't help but watch her. She was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. Maybe even prettier than Brooke Shields.

"Hey, what homeroom do you have?" He asked quickly.

The girl looked at her paper and then back at him, saying, "Mr. Simpson."

A grin formed on his face and he lifted up his schedule to show her.

"Me too. Want to walk together?"

When she looked at him and smiled again, a slight blush began to form on his cheeks.

"Sure. I think it's down this way," she said, directing him toward the front of the hall. It was quiet as they walked before he realized that he hadn't told her his name.

"I'm Steve, by the way. Steve Harrington."

"Jacqueline Cooper, but you can call me Jac." She peeked over at him and then they went into the classroom, finding desks next to each other.

His mom would be glad to know that he'd already made a friend, but he wasn't going to mention anything about knocking the girl over first thing.

"You knocked her over?" Dustin snorted. The kid thought it was the funniest damn thing he'd ever heard, so Steve reached over and hit him on the head.

"It was an accident."

Dustin fixed his hat and glared at him. "That's real smooth, Steve. Is that the best way to get a girl's attention?"

There was a teasing tone to his voice, but one look at Dustin's face and Steve could tell that he was being serious. He really wanted to know, right now, how to attract a girl.

"I wouldn't recommend it," he said wryly. "Sure, we became friends,

but most girls wouldn't like you after that."

He sighed and thought how meeting Jacqueline had changed everything in his life, and then he'd ruined that all by going after Nancy, and all sorts of things had gone to shit after that. Those two girls were very different from one other, but on their own level when it came to all the other girls at Hawkins High. He tried to explain that to Dustin, but it was taking the younger kid a few minutes to get it. The kid looked like he was going to pull out a pad of paper and start taking notes.

"Do you like someone or something?" Steve asked him, the conversation helping to distract him from what was going on and why he was in the car with Dustin.

Dustin told him about this new girl at school, Max, and how he thought she was cool and funny. And she rode a skateboard which was definitely new for Hawkins. With all of his current relationship drama, Steve knew he wasn't exactly cut out to be giving advice anymore, but why not try?

Steve had done some crazy things regarding girls, like sneaking into their rooms at night when their parents were home, but Dustin was doing some out of this world stuff. Literally. He had planned on keeping this lizard thing to impress Max. That fact blew Steve's mind.

It was getting dark and there was no way they were going to get anything done, so they agreed to meet the next day. He was sure that Dustin's mom would kill him if he didn't bring him home. Dustin swore he would be okay if Steve just dropped him off at the Wheeler's house to get his bike and then he'd ride home, but Steve shut that down real quick. No way was he going to let someone else go missing on his watch.

"Hey," he called out the rolled down window. Halfway up the driveway, Dustin turned toward him, eyes curious. "I expect you to fill me in more on this girl tomorrow. You owe me."

9. Chapter Nine

Steve picked Dustin up early the next morning. The sun was barely up, but he had been up half the night worrying about Jacqueline and where to start. They stopped at the butcher shop and bought as much meat as they could, and chopped it up before putting it into buckets. Their plan was to walk down the train tracks while they put out the food for Dart. Dustin said he had the perfect place to go to trap him. Steve was still unsure about it all, but honestly, if it got him one step closer to finding Jacqueline, he was in. He was out of ideas.

While they were walking down the train tracks, Steve jumped back into Dustin's love life. It would at least take his mind off of what they were doing.

"So, you were going to keep this lizard-slug to impress Max, right?" He asked, dropping some of the chopped meat onto the ground. "Max, a girl you just met."

Dustin rolled his eyes; he was walking in front of him, but Steve could tell.

"That's grossly oversimplifying things," Dustin responded, also dropping meat onto the train tracks.

"I mean, why would a girl like a nasty slug anyway?"

Evidently, it being an interdimensional slug made it awesome and something a girl would like, but Steve didn't get that at all. Dustin was trying too hard. So, he told him.

"Well, not everyone can have your perfect hair, alright?"

"It's not about the hair man," Steve said, mildly offended. "The key with girls is just acting like you don't care."

"Even if you do?"

"Yeah, exactly."

As the words came out of his mouth, Steve came to a stop.

He was an idiot.

Dustin was a few steps ahead of him and the younger boy stopped in his tracks as well, turning to look back at him.

“What?”

“I was just gonna say, it drives girls nut to act like you don’t care, but-but that’s ridiculous.”

That’s what he’d done with Jacqueline. Instead of telling her about his feelings when he’d gone to her house after a fight with this asshole Andrew, he’d gone after Nancy instead. Then, Jacqueline had dropped him. For a while, he thought it was working, but he also started liking Nancy. And after a couple of months, it was obvious that Jacqueline didn’t care about him like that anyway. She didn’t care so much that she had stopped being friends with him. They had become friends again after the whole Demogorgon incident, and she told him that Carol had fed her some lie that she refused to tell him, but it backfired in his face. Acting like he didn’t care had ruined everything. But his relationship with Nancy was wonderful, or so he thought, and now he knew how to act better than that. Thanks to them, Jacqueline for coming back into his life and pushing him toward Nancy, and Nancy for showing him it was okay to open up about his emotions. And just overall not being a dick.

But, still, if he hadn’t acted like that in the first place, nothing bad would have ever happened to Barb or Nancy or Jacqueline.

He began walking again, catching up with Dustin and shaking his head at himself.

“So, I do act like I care?” Dustin asked hesitantly.

“Not exactly,” he said. “You need to figure out if she likes you, too.”

“How do I do that?”

“You just wait until you feel this, uh, electricity. Like before it storms.”

“So, like an electromagnetic field when the clouds in the atmosphere

.”

“No,” he said, amazed by this kid’s brain. “It’s like a sexual electricity. You feel that and then you make your move.”

Okay, he could give this kid some good advice. It was just the opposite of what he’d done. When he’d felt that electricity with Jacqueline, he ran and acted like he didn’t care, worried that she would reject him. He had wanted her to come to him.

They continued to walk and talk about the girls in their lives, and Dustin couldn’t shut up about how different and special Max was. But love was complicated, especially for a thirteen-year-old, so Steve backtracked on some of his advice and told him not to fall in love too soon.

“She’s only gonna break your heart, and you’re way too young for that shit,” he said, the silence surrounding them for a bit.

Again, he thought about Jacqueline being out there alone and possibly with a monster, and he couldn’t handle it. He started talking again.

His hair routine was a well-guarded secret, but he figured he could tell someone who could use it to their benefit. But of course, he had to threaten him against saying anything.

Only one other person knew his hair secrets.

“My mom uses that shampoo,” Jacqueline was saying as she came out of the bathroom, causing Steve’s head to snap up. “And that hairspray.”

She sounded like she was just making a comment, but there was a playful glint in her eyes. When he jumped to say, “Oh yeah, that’s my mom’s, too,” she started snickering.

“So that’s the secret, huh? I always thought it was all natural.” She stepped over to him and touched the top of his head with delicate fingers, tilting her head to the side, tongue sticking out from between her lips like she was doing a science experiment. “It feels natural.”

She was teasing him. And she was suddenly running her fingers further into his hair, ruining the work he'd done that morning. It felt nice, so that had to stop. He reached up and grabbed her wrist, tugging her gently away from his head.

"Don't mess it up," he muttered, resulting in a giggle from her. Okay. If she was going to laugh like that, she could touch his hair. Sometimes. Dropping her wrist, he reached up to fix his hair.

Her eyes stayed on him as she sat down next to him on the couch.

"Stop, it looks fine. I didn't mess it up." She paused and raised an eyebrow. "There's too much hairspray in it to mess it up."

He cracked his own smile then.

"Shut up," he said, but he was laughing so she took the opportunity to steal the TV remote and turned it to MTV. They watched a few music videos before Jacqueline spoke up next to him.

"Where do you think we'll be in five years?" She asked.

"What do you mean?" They were only 16. Why were they thinking about the future?

When he turned to face her, she was already looking at him. Her eyes were staring into his, all open and bright. He had to look back at the television.

"You didn't forget our English paper, did you? We're supposed to write about after high school and what we want to be doing in college or at work."

He had forgotten, but that just meant she would be staying over longer to help him. That was a routine for them.

"I'll be in the NBA, obviously, or on the Olympic swim team."

Jacqueline laughed softly and moved to rest on the arm of the couch, throwing her legs out to rest them in his lap.

"And your footboy, evidently." It was a joke, but it didn't stop him from

placing a hand on her leg.

She grinned and pressed one of her feet into his thigh, wiggling her toes. "I guess it could be worse," she said wistfully, stretching her legs out so her calves were resting on his knees. His hand slid up to her knee and he looked down at his hand for a few seconds.

"I just don't want to work for my dad, you know?" Steve turned his head to her and shrugged.

"Yeah," Jacqueline replied. "My dad really wants me to go to law school since I don't have any brothers to take over his law firm." She rolled her eyes.

"What do you wanna do?" He asked slowly, unsure if he wanted to know if she wanted to leave Hawkins.

She sat up, moving her legs from his lap and pulling them to sit cross-legged next to him. For a second, she sat there staring at her lap and playing with the hem of her pants at the ankle.

"I just want to be happy, like I am right now." She shrugged and that was all she said.

Steve smiled and nodded. "That sounds really good."

They still had a couple hours of daylight when they reached the old junkyard. This was where Dustin had brought him, and it was good. There were plenty of places to hide from Dart and a lot of equipment to reinforce the old school bus sitting in the middle. That could be their lookout.

It was perfect.

"This'll do just fine," he said to Dustin. "Good call, dude."

Dumping the rest of the meat out, his head popped up at the sound of someone calling out to them. It was another one of Dustin, Mike, and Will's friend, Lucas, and a girl. She, he had never seen.

"Who's that?" He asked as the pair made their way to them.

One look at Dustin's face and, okay, that was Max.

Dustin and Lucas needed to have an important talk, so he filled Max in on what their plan was. She was good help. Small, but she could move some lighter pieces of metal. They set off to work and Steve threw himself into finding all the metal he could, trying and failing now to keep his mind off of Jacqueline. He wondered if Hopper had been able to put in the missing person's report yet and if that would even do anything. What had her mom said? It had almost been two days since she'd gone missing.

He knew that Dustin had his doubts on that, but it didn't matter. Everyone could think she was gone, like for real, and he wouldn't believe them. She wasn't gone.

If Dustin and Lucas didn't get their asses into gear, they were going to lose daylight and have a lot more to deal with. He kicked a chair in frustration on his way over to where the two boys were hiding behind an old car and picked it up, walking over to them.

Slamming the chair into the car, he said, "Hey, dickheads! How come the only one helping me out is this random girl? We lose light in 40 minutes. Let's go."

The boys complained, but they followed.

As they continued to work, he was starting to panic again, his worry coming out in bouts of anger where he would roughly slam a piece of metal against the bus. Dustin seemed to sense it because he came over when they were putting their finishing touches on the bus.

"Hey," Dustin spoke up behind him. Steve didn't turn to him, trying to get this done so they could do this and find Jacqueline and get her home.

"What?" He asked harshly, immediately deflating at the sound of his own voice. He let out a long breath and pressed his forehead against the cold exterior of the bus, trying to calm himself. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to say thanks. I know this is really messed up, and I know what it's like to have a friend being taken by the Demogorgon,

so thanks for helping me.”

Steve looked at him in confusion because he should have been thanking Dustin for helping him. If he hadn't bumped into him at the Wheeler house, he never would have known where to start.

“No, it's fine.” He let one side of his mouth lift up. “Thanks for helping me.”

They settled into the bus once night fell, Dustin and Steve inside while Lucas and Max went up to the emergency exit to watch for Dart. The growls came first, but it was too foggy to see anything for a couple of minutes. Suddenly, Lucas called out that he had eyes on the monster.

“Where is it?” Steve muttered, searching the junkyard grounds through the bus's window. He couldn't see anything through the thick fog. His breathing was getting heavier by the second. If this didn't work, he wasn't sure what to do next.

Finally, it appeared through the fog, much bigger than he'd expected from the way Dustin had explained it to him, almost like it had shed its skin again since they found the last one. It was just walking like it wasn't interested in the beef that they had dropped out to lead it there.

“He's not taking the bait,” he said, voice shaking. “Why isn't he taking the bait?”

“Maybe he's not hungry,” Dustin replied, and Steve swallowed roughly.

It was full... or something, or maybe it didn't want any more of the beef.

Backing away from the window, he stood in the bus and thought about his options. He wasn't going to go down without a fight. He was getting Jacqueline back if it was the last thing he did. Honestly, he wasn't sure in that moment how he was going to do that if all he could think to do was kill it, but if he did that, it was a start.

Grabbing his bat, he turned back to Dustin, the boy worriedly asking what he was doing.

“Just get ready,” he said firmly, tossing the boy his lighter.

This is stupid, this is so stupid, Steve thought to himself as he pulled open the door to the bus and stepped down the steps. Once his feet hit the ground, he took a deep breath through his nose. But Jac would do this for me.

The thing was giving out these almost gurgling noises, so he walked in that direction, giving his bat a couple of test twirls. His adrenaline was starting to pump in his veins. This was it. He was either going to kill this thing or it was going to kill him.

There was no sign of it other than the noises it was making, but he needed it to come out so he could get to it. He whistled a few times, calling for it like someone would a dog, bat poised above his shoulder ready to swing.

“Dinner time,” he said, at last, breathing shallowly. “Come on, man.”

Swinging his bat in practice so he would be ready, the thing came out in the clearing. It looked like a dog, but it had the head of the Demogorgon. Shit yeah, he was scared. It was much different from going back into the Byers’ house. Then, he didn’t know what to expect, but this time he knew what was out there and it wasn’t happening as quickly as it had then.

But he was ready for this showdown.

Planting his feet, he stared the thing down, waiting for it to come just a little bit closer so he could make his move.

“Steve! Watch out!” Lucas called from atop the bus and he gritted his teeth.

“Little busy here!” He shouted back, eyes still on the monster in front of him. He almost had it.

“3 o’clock! 3 o’clock!” Lucas continued to yell and Steve quickly turned his head in that direction, spotting another one now on one of

the cars. No way. Where had that come from?

“Steve!” Dustin called out, opening the bus door. “Abort! Abort!”

As soon as he looked toward Dustin, he heard a growl behind him and looked back just in time to see the thing’s face opening up. Then it was running toward him while another charged that way, so he ran, rolling over a car in the process and slamming the bat into one of them. Running the rest of the way to the bus, he realized just how close he had come to getting eaten by them.

He jumped onto the bus and fell onto the floor while the kids closed the door. He let out a sharp breath. Suddenly the bus jerked from the impact of one or two of those things running into it and the kids ran further into the back to get away. When the arm or leg or whatever came into the bus, he hit it as hard as he could with the bat, repeatedly doing so as anger surged up in him.

The kids were in the back screaming, but he was preoccupied with taking his aggression out on this monster to pay too much attention to what they were saying. Not to mention he needed to keep it from getting onto the bus and eating them all.

But when he heard Max screaming, her voice louder than the banging or the boys put together, he ran over and pushed her out of the way. Up above them, almost coming through the emergency exit, was a demo-whatever the hell. It screamed loudly at him and he thrust the bat up toward its head, ready to take it on. Then it closed its head and turned like it was listening to something. It roared in that direction and hopped down. Everything stopped. The growls of the monsters grew fainter and fainter as they all ran off.

After a few minutes of silence, Steve once again stepped off the bus, bat held up in attack mode.

The kids came out slowly, talking about what happened. Dustin thought that Steve had scared them off, but he shook his head.

“No, no way. They’re going somewhere.”

Steve and the kids were walking down the railroad tracks back toward his car, Dustin and Lucas arguing about Dart and Dustin keeping the thing (fair point, Lucas), but then he heard the growling again. It was in the distance, but it was there. He walked off closer to it, a bit away from the kids as they continued to fight.

“Hey, guys,” he said, getting their attention to come closer. They heard it, too, and Lucas looked through his binoculars, seeing Hawkins Lab. It was dark, but that’s exactly where they were going.

“They’re going home.”

“The Upside Down?” He asked, turning toward the other three. “Let’s go.”

They made the rest of the trek in mostly silence, pushing through the trees when they got closer to the entrance gates. Almost there. Shining his flashlight as they walked, he spotted a car and two people standing close to the gate.

“Steve?” They both questioned. Nancy and Jonathan.

“Nancy?”

“What are you doing here?” He asked at the same time they asked him.

“We’re looking for Mike and Will,” Nancy replied and he felt his blood run cold. Was someone else missing?

“I’m looking for Jacqueline.”

Nancy and Jonathan’s eyes both went wide with shock.

“What do you mean?” Jonathan demanded, Nancy shaking her head like she didn’t believe him.

“I mean, she’s been missing for like 2 days and I need to find her!”

His eyes fell to Nancy, who was now gripping Jonathan’s arm for support.

Dustin stepped forward and asked, "Will and Mike aren't in there, are they?"

As soon as Jonathan asked why he wanted to know, a loud screech sounded from the lab.

"We have to get in there," Jonathan said in a hurry, running over to the entrance booth and trying to get the power on. He pressed the button to open the gate, but it wasn't working. Everyone else was waiting in front of the gate for the first sign of it opening. Steve was getting more anxious by the second and one look at everyone else and he knew they were feeling the same, especially Nancy. She looked over at him.

"Why do you think she's in there?" She asked.

"She didn't come to school yesterday and her mom didn't even know. And someone found her keys and a library book in town. She wouldn't just leave them there."

Nancy nodded her head in agreement.

It was taking too long to open the gate. He paced the distance of the driveway a few times before leaning against the booth and thinking about what they could do next. If they couldn't get into the lab and figure out how to get to the Upside Down, there had to be another way.

"Do you remember where that portal or whatever was?" He asked Nancy and her head snapped toward him.

"What?"

"When you went into the Upside Down last year. Where was that?" He began to pace again, speaking quickly. "If we can't get in this way, I have to go some other way."

Nancy watched him before saying, "Steve, you need to relax."

"No!" He turned around, eyes flashing angrily at her. "Jac - Jac is missing and it's my responsibility to find her."

They stared at each other for a moment, having a silent conversation about everything that had happened with Barb the year before, and he hoped that she knew that he understood how she felt now. He hoped she knew he was sorry for only thinking about himself when Barb had been dragged to the Upside Down and killed.

She must have seen enough in his eyes because her face softened and her shoulders dropped.

“We’ll figure out another way.”

He tried to argue, but before he could say anything, the gate opened and Jonathan and Nancy were jumping into his car and speeding off toward the lab. Just leaving them there to wait. For what, he had no clue.

It wasn’t much later that two vehicles, Jonathan’s and Hopper’s truck, were speeding toward them honking their horns. They all ran out of the way just in time for Jonathan to pass, but Hopper stopped and told them to get in the truck.

10. Chapter Ten

Notes for the Chapter:

Another long one and we're almost to the end! 2-3 chapters left.

They met up with everyone at the Byers' house where they were filled in on everything that was going on. Will was comatose and Mrs. Byers' boyfriend was dead, killed by some demo-dogs while they were in the lab. That information did nothing to settle Steve's nerves or worries about Jacqueline. The worst part was waiting, but they were hoping to get some information from Will through this thing. They'd been able to find Will with the help of a psychic girl named Eleven in a similar way when he was in the Upside Down. Steve wondered if that could help find Jacqueline.

The kids, worried about Will and mourning Bob, sat at the kitchen table and Steve stood behind them like he was in protective mode. He'd become attached to those shitsheads throughout the day.

Steve tuned Mike out as he talked about Bob, not because he didn't care but because he didn't want the same thing to happen to Jacqueline. It wasn't until they started talking about Dart and an army that Steve snapped back into the conversation.

"But there's an army now."

"His army."

Steve asked, "What do you mean?"

"His army," Mike repeated. "Maybe if we stop him, we can stop his army, too."

Mike showed them all a picture Will had drawn of the Shadow Monster, the thing that got Will and infected him with some sort of virus. That virus connected him to the monsters and the Upside Down and the tunnels connecting to the Upside Down.

It was like a ray of hope suddenly came over all of them. Mike was

talking faster, and Steve told him to slow down so he could try to figure it out. The boy slowed down just enough to make it clearer.

“Okay, so, the Shadow Monster’s inside everything. And if the vines feel something like pain, then so does Will.”

“And so does Dart.”

He was starting to get it. If they could kill even one part of this thing, that would kill all the demo-dogs, and that would give Jacqueline time to get out, right?

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were all on the same page, understanding everything that the others were saying. And even though some of it was going over Steve’s head, because these kids were way too smart for him, he thought he was getting enough to know that they needed to kill something to give her a chance.

After some more explanation, some that he got and more that he didn’t, they were talking about their Dungeons and Dragons game and how the entire town was going to be destroyed if this monster got its way. It all connected in their minds. He didn’t understand that either.

Again, they were told to wait for Hopper’s military backup, but Dustin and Mike were putting up a fight against the Chief. None of them knew what they were fighting, but one thing was clear - they all wanted to kill it.

Steve cornered Hopper as soon as he could get him alone. The man had barely said two words to him since they got there and it was pissing Steve off. He knew they were all busy, but Jacqueline had been missing long enough, and no one was doing anything about it.

“Hey,” he said as he met him in the hallway. “Did you talk to Jacqueline’s mom?”

Hopper nodded. “I didn’t tell her everything, told her we wouldn’t need a search party because I have some information about where she could be. She’s reluctant, but I don’t think she’ll try to find her

herself. I'll figure out what to tell her when we know what happened."

Steve ran a hand through his hair. He hadn't done anything to it that morning, so his fingers went through the locks, tugging on a few tangles.

"She'll decide what to tell her mom, okay? She might not tell her any of it."

"Steve," Hopper began, getting his attention. "We have a lot going on right now. There's not much we can do at this point." The remorse was obvious on Hopper's face, his forehead wrinkled as he frowned, but that didn't make Steve accepting of his words.

"No, I'm going to find her and she's going to be fine." He glared at the older man. "You do what you have to do for Will, but she's my priority and I'm getting her -" His words cut off at the sound of a shout from the main room. With that, Hopper pushed past him, leaving him standing there in the hallway.

Don't give up. There was a voice in the back of his mind that sounded like Jacqueline's, making his stomach drop, and he had to brace himself against the wall to keep himself upright.

Too much happened in the next hour for Steve to comprehend. A plan was made to get Will, or the Mind Flayer as they were now calling his virus, to give up information about where it was and how to destroy it. That meant they had to set the shed up to look like a place Will wouldn't recognize so it wouldn't know where they were.

While he was working to clean out the shed, Nancy walked over. She was quiet for a minute while she put some things in a box.

"You think you'll find her?" She asked.

Why did everyone have to sound so doubtful?

"I know I will."

"I understand that more than anyone, except Mrs. Byers, but you

know what happened to Barb.”

“Shit, I know.” Steve sighed and lifted up a bundle of Christmas lights, remembering what Nancy and Jonathan had told him the year before about Mrs. Byers talking to Will through the lights. “I hate everything I said to you while you were looking for her and wanting to pretend it never happened.” Yeah, he definitely got it now.

“Thanks.”

“I feel like it’s all my fault, like I should’ve been with her and I know that’s crazy. She -”

“Never would have let you coddle her.”

“Coddle?”

“Baby her.”

Steve let out a harsh laugh. “Oh, yeah. She would never allow that.”

There was a pause in their conversation as they continued to clear the space. During that time, he thought about everything that happened with Nancy on Halloween and the next day and it was time for him to confront that. Plus, he saw the way Nancy was attached to Jonathan throughout all of this. It wasn’t like he didn’t love Nancy, but maybe they had both been unfair to each other during their relationship. They were both dealing with their own complicated feelings the entire time.

“Do you want to be with him?” He asked, glancing over at her.

Nancy looked at him, her mouth opening as she took a breath. An awkward question, but they needed to talk about it. Jacqueline told him to talk to Nancy and this time he was going to have a real conversation with her. Her mouth closed before she gave him a quick nod.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen there, maybe nothing, but I guess we’ll figure it out.” Her voice got lighter at the end, eyes lighting up slightly. It was a good look on her, a look he had been able to give her at one time, but he would learn to be happy for her

and Jonathan. He could do that.

“Yeah, I guess you will.” He mustered as much of a smile as he could under the circumstances and Nancy reached over, squeezing his arm.

“Jacqueline’s a fighter.” Nancy’s eyes were watery as she spoke and she looked down while continuing to look through a box. “I wish I could help you, Steve, but I have to help Jonathan.”

“It’s okay, Nance. It’s okay.”

He nodded before picking up a box and walking back toward the house.

The solution to getting rid of the Mind Flayer came in the form of morse code from Will - **CLOSE GATE**. That was all they got out of him because the next second, he had realized where they were and the Mind Flayer sent demo-dogs to get them. They were all ready to fight them off. Then out of nowhere, a demo-dog flew through the window. It was dead.

A girl unknown to him stepped into the house and it was like a freaking family reunion. Mike knew her, Dustin knew her, Lucas knew her, even Hopper knew her. It took him a few minutes to figure out that she was the psychic girl he had heard about.

If she had been able to help get Will back, she could help with Jacqueline.

Steve watched her talk to Hopper for a few minutes, wanting nothing more than to talk to her about getting Jacqueline back. Before he could, Hopper and Eleven were leaving to go close the gate. Joyce, Jonathan, and Nancy left soon after with Will to go get the virus out of him.

“Where’s the gate?” He asked as he headed for the door. He turned back to the quiet room. “Let’s go!”

“Wait.” Dustin came over to him, looking more nervous than he had during this entire adventure.

“What? We don’t have time to talk.”

“If they close the gate, there will be no way to get Jacqueline out, so if she’s in there we have to get to her first. But the gate has to be closed.”

As Dustin spoke, Steve felt his hope dwindling. He tilted his head back and groaned. He was running out of time.

“But there has to be another way in,” he said desperately.

He began to pace the room as he thought it over and the kids tried to come up with their own solutions.

“The portal in the woods,” he said suddenly. “Nancy went in it last year. She just told me where it was.”

“Steve,” Dustin tried to his attention as he continued his pacing. “Steve!”

When he turned his attention to the boy, he could once again see the nervousness clearly on his face.

“It closed up.”

“But there’s another way.” Mike was up and running around the room as he spoke, barely giving Steve time to react. “All the tunnels connect and lead to the portal at the lab. If we can find a way to get into the tunnels, we can get into the Upside Down. Then we can find Jacqueline and after that we can torch the place to help Eleven. It hates heat.” Steve had to hand it to him; the kid had to be a genius. They all were evidently. But it was dangerous and he couldn’t lead four kids into the Upside Down.

“There’s no we here, okay? I’m gonna do this alone.”

The kids stared at him.

“But -” Mike started.

“No buts. I’ll drop you all off at one of your houses on the way.”

All four of them started talking, different conversations going on at once, and he couldn't keep track of anything any of them were saying.

"Hey, hey, hey." Clapping his hands, he got their attention. "Where can I get in?"

Mike started speeding around again until he found a location in one of the pictures of the tunnel system Will had drawn.

"Here. This is a connection spot, its hub. Get there and it should lead you anywhere inside."

"Got it," Steve said, studying the map. "Alright, let's go. We'll take -" He opened the door but stopped short. "We don't have a car."

He'd left his near the train tracks and Hopper had driven them all to the Byers' house. And everyone else was gone. Slapping the door, he placed his hands flat on the wood and pressed his forehead against it. He was about to make a run for it, at least try to make it in time, but maybe he wouldn't have to. The sound of a car's engine was getting closer to the house. It was a miracle.

"It's my brother. He can't know I'm here," Max said, worry evident in her voice. "He'll kill me. He'll kill us."

Steve peeked out the window on the door and spotted the car coming to a stop. Billy Hargrove. He looked over at Max.

"That's your brother?" He didn't mean to sound judgemental, but the guy was a dick and Max wasn't. It was obvious that she was scared, and Steve knew Billy couldn't find out about what they were doing there, so he took over. "I'll take care of this."

Opening the door again, he stepped out onto the front porch just as Billy was walking that direction. He smirked when he saw Steve there.

"Am I dreaming or is that you, Harrington?" He asked, pulling a cigarette from his lips.

"Yeah, it's me. Don't cream your pants." Steve walked down the

porch steps and placed his hands on his hips in a stance he hoped was intimidating. Billy didn't look threatened at all; he looked amused more than anything. He didn't have time for this, but Max was terrified and he just needed to say enough to get Billy to leave. Then he could figure out how to get to the Upside Down.

"What are you doing here, amigo?"

"I could ask you the same thing, amigo." Steve grimaced slightly at calling the guy a friend, folding his arms in front of him. Just being close to the guy had him feeling uncomfortable.

"Figured you'd be chasing after one of your girls, but instead I find you at Byers' house. That's a little odd."

"There's nothing here for you, Billy."

"Maybe, but you know I'm new here. I need you to fill me in on some things." He paused and took a step closer. "What's up with you and Jacqueline anyway? Carol told me that you've been best friends since middle school, blah blah blah, but I swear you've ruined her for other guys."

Steve's eyes flashed angrily at the fact that Billy had the nerve to mention Jacqueline, and the way he was talking. Like he had a thing for her or something.

"You need to go," he said simply.

"Hit a nerve, alright." Licking his bottom lip, Billy backed up with his hands raised before stopping. "On second thought, could you give me her number? I'd really like to finish what we started at the party."

Those words were enough to take Steve off guard. He paused as his mind went through Billy's words, trying to decipher their meaning and what he wanted with Jacqueline, but Billy just kept talking. He smirked like he always did, like everything was amusing.

"I'm looking for my step sister. Little birdy told me she was here."

"Huh, that's weird. I don't know her."

“Small, redhead, bit of a bitch.”

Steve shook his head. “She’s not here.”

Billy nodded, and for a second Steve thought he was going to leave this time until he asked, “Then who’s that?”

Billy pointed to the window and Steve turned to see, noticing the kids ducking out of view. Well shit. He began looking back at Billy before the guy was pushing him down and kicking him in the side. There was something seriously messed up with this guy. No wonder Max was scared. Just like the day before, Steve scrambled up and rushed into the house. Billy already had Lucas, holding him up by his shirt and all of the kids looked horrified.

“You’re dead, Sinclair.”

Over the past couple of years, Steve had been in way too many fights. But right now, he didn’t care about himself. This kid had done nothing wrong. Steve grabbed Billy’s shoulder and roughly turned him.

“No, you are,” he growled at the taller guy. Pulling his arm back, Steve punched Billy in the face. It phased Billy for a moment, but then he laughed. He sounded deranged.

“Looks like you got some fire in you after all. I’ve been waiting to meet this King Steve everybody’s been telling me so much about.”

Steve pushed a hand through his hair as Billy stepped closer. Putting a finger to Billy’s chest, he shoved him. “Get out.” They stared at each other and Steve was able to duck when Billy tried to punch him, throwing and connecting a couple punches of his own. The kids were yelling, panicked voices filling the room, though some of what he could hear sounded almost excited by the fight. Until he’d backed him up into the kitchen and Billy smashed a plate on his head. His vision immediately went a little out of focus, but he was able to keep himself upright for a moment. But, by then, even the smallest amount of hesitation was enough to allow Billy to deliver a headbutt that knocked Steve to the floor.

There wasn't any fight left in him as Billy overpowered him, holding him against the floor as he started punching him repeatedly in the face. Steve couldn't hear much of anything, a jumble of voices yelling and the sound Billy's knuckles cracking against his face. There was no way for him to keep track of how many times Billy hit him before everything went black.

He woke up in a cramped space. It took him five seconds to open his eyes, gaze landing on Mike. For a moment he thought it was Nancy, but that didn't make sense. Then there was Dustin on his other side. So, he was crammed somewhere between the two boys, and whatever they were in was moving. His head was pounding, it hurt to open his mouth, the edge of his lips tugging when he went to talk. Despite the painful feeling going through his entire body, he realized that they were in a car. But where had they gotten a car? Who was driving? Was it Billy? At that thought, he began to sit up.

"Hey, buddy. Shh. It's okay. You put up a good fight. He kicked your ass, but you put up a good fight." The sound of Dustin talking was warbled, making him want to close his eyes again and go back to sleep, but that was when he heard Lucas' voice from the front seat.

Was he giving someone directions? Where were they going?

"What's going on?"

None of it made sense until he noticed the person in the driver's seat.

Max.

Max was driving!

"Oh my god." Steve tried to push himself against the backseat.

"Steve, relax," Dustin said. "She's driven before."

The three young boys argued about this while Steve tried to get his bearings and stop the dizziness he was feeling. Naturally, he began yelling out for her to slow down and stop the car. Dustin told them that he would be cool about it, according to Mike's accusing, but Steve was far from cool. They were going to die!

“Everybody shut up!” Max yelled from the front, speeding up. “I’m trying to focus!”

“What happened? Whose car is this?” Steve’s voice came out as a shout, pitch rising with every word. This earned an exasperated look from Mike. Dustin jumped to explain.

“You missed it, man. You know that stuff they were using to keep Will asleep? Well, Max stabbed Billy with it!” Dustin grinned down at him. His eyes were bright and excited, and it made Steve think of Jacqueline when she was that animated.

Steve shook his head to clear it and then groaned at the pain it caused. “She what? Shit. She didn’t kill him, did she?” That was the last thing they needed - a dead guy on their hands, asshole or not.

“Nah, he’s fine.”

“Sleeping like a baby,” Mike added. Steve looked over at him again before focusing on the two kids up front, in the still moving vehicle.

“Oh. So this is Billy’s car.” He let out a dry laugh. Now they had stolen a car. “Where the hell are we going?”

Lucas looked between the front seats and said, “To the tunnels.” He didn’t wait for a reaction, just looked back at the map and called for Max to make a turn. She did, and it was a hard left, hitting a mailbox and speeding down the narrow road. Lucas’ screams joined Steve’s as she almost missed hitting the brakes as they reached a huge hole in the ground.

The kids hopped out of the car, leaving Steve to fall out. His legs were shaking, breathing still erratic due to the stress of the ride, and there was no way those kids were going down in the tunnels.

“Guys.” He balanced himself on the car’s open door. “No.” They were all gathering their gear from earlier in the night and they were grabbing goggles and bandanas from the trunk. “Where do you think you’re going?”

They ignored him.

“You are not going down there. I made myself clear!”

“Steve!” Dustin yelled. “You’re upset, I get it, but the bottom line is, a party member requires assistance and it is our duty to provide that assistance. Now I know you want to keep us safe, so keep us safe.” Dustin handed him his backpack, bat sticking out. “We can’t let our most valuable players down. Eleven is ours right now.”

Steve sighed, knowing the kid was right, even if he didn’t want them to be involved in this. He could go down there himself, but he knew that he had a better chance of doing his job with Dustin, Mike, Lucas, and Max by his side.

“And Jacqueline is your most valuable player, right?”

For the second time that night, looking at Dustin made him think of Jacqueline, this time their similar determination. He nodded at him.

“Yeah. She’s gonna like you.”

Dustin smiled. Steve could see it even through the bandana the boy had wrapped around his mouth. Shaking his head, he put the backpack on. It was a good thing he had enough adrenaline to make it down into those tunnels.

Jacqueline was weak and cold. Her fingers were numb as she walked, dragging her hands along the wall for any sign of an opening. It was too dark to see much in front of her. She didn’t know how much time had passed since she had been pulled into this place, but it had been long enough that the feeling of hunger had turned into a dull ache in her stomach and her throat burned every time she swallowed.

She didn’t know how little Will had made it for as long as he had, but that thought kept her going. If he could be that resilient, so could she.

And she knew that Steve was looking for her.

The Upside Down was a bizarre place. At times she could hear him, could hear other people, and she tried her hardest to yell out for them. She didn’t think they ever heard her, but she was trying.

There wasn't much time for her left. There was a sort of electricity in the air, mingling with the cold air, like there was something brewing around her. She pushed at the wall again, trying to push her hands through it to the other side. Nothing. Groaning, she stopped in her tracks and closed her eyes for just a moment. She had tried everywhere she could get to, the library, other parts of town square, the woods. At some point, she had fallen and found herself in what appeared to be a cave, or a tunnel system. Every time she made a turn, it looked like she was in the same spot, but she couldn't figure out where it all led. All she knew was that it was freezing and dark.

She didn't want to give up, but she was tired. Pulling her hands into her sleeves, she wrapped her arms around her middle. If she could just rest for a minute.

"Help! Help! Help!"

Jacqueline's eyes popped open and she gasped, looking around desperately for the source of the voice she was hearing. She couldn't be sure that it wasn't outside, so she hurried over to the wall, banging on it.

"Hey!" She yelled hoarsely, voice cracking. "Hey!"

The screaming continued and she slid down the wall, desperately hitting it. Her hands were already bruised and sore, but she kept on because she didn't have any other options. It was silent for a moment. Her breath caught in her chest, hoping that meant that whoever was there somehow heard her. But it was too quiet. No one was there.

Her brain was playing tricks on her now. It made sense. She hadn't slept in days, so she was hallucinating. She'd probably imagined all of the voices she heard.

Grabbing her head, she screamed as loud as she could. It wasn't that loud thanks to the dryness of her throat, but if someone was there, maybe they would hear her. If not, maybe she'd pass out from screaming and not have to deal with any of this anymore.

"Alright, Wheeler. Think we found your hub."

If her mind was playing tricks on her this time, fine. As long as she felt this hope swelling in her chest as she died.

“Steve.” She pushed herself up and clambered in the direction of his voice. “Steve!”

“Guys, shut up. Did you hear that?”

“Steve!”

“Jac?”

She called out his name again.

“Where are you?” He yelled. She could see lights bouncing off of the walls and a few other voices joining his as they got closer to one another. It was finally happening. “I’m coming!”

She tripped and fell forward, but this time she didn’t hit the floor. Two arms wrapped around her and she tilted her head back to see Steve looking down at her. His face was covered in a pair of goggles and a bandana, but there was no mistaking it was him.

“I knew I’d find you.”

Steve pulled her up to stand and she leaned against him for support, gripping onto his jacket sleeves. “I knew you were looking.”

“Are you okay?” His hands were running over her shoulders and up her neck, cupping her face in his hands. She closed her eyes and nodded, pushing herself closer to him for warmth.

“I’m cold.”

Her words snapped him out of his action and he turned to talk to someone else. That was when Jacqueline looked at the people with him. Kids? They must have been who she heard.

“Let’s drench it,” one of them said.

“Drench it? Drench what?”

“We have to torch this place,” Steve said. “It’s a long story, but I’ll tell you when we’re out.” He still held onto her and she stood shakily, glancing as the kids started spraying gasoline on the walls and wetting the floor with it. Steve walked her over to another area and made sure she was okay to stand on her own before he joined the rest of the group. With the bandanas and goggles, it took her a moment to recognize the kids, and she didn’t know who the redheaded one was, but she had seen the other three at the Byers’ house. They were Will’s friends. But where was Will?

“Hey,” she said, swallowing roughly to dampen her throat. “Where’s Will?”

They all turned to her and Mike said, “He’s sick. That’s why we’re here with Steve. There’s another monster and we’re gonna kill them.”

“Oh. Well, good. Kill it.”

When they were finished prepping the tunnels, the group came over to where she and Mike were and Steve pushed them all behind him before taking a lighter out of his pocket.

“Alright. You guys ready?”

“Ready,” the kids replied. Jacqueline nodded. She couldn’t see Steve’s eyes, but she could feel him looking at her, and she reached forward to hold onto his shoulder.

“Light her up,” Dustin said.

“I’m in such deep shit,” Steve said as he flicked his lighter open and lit it, tossing it into the middle of the tunnel. The ground was engulfed in flames and resulted in a loud screeching sound as the tunnels were burned.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Steve and the kids moved to run and he wrapped an arm around her waist, helping to push her forward toward the exit. She still had enough energy left in her to walk quickly, but she wouldn’t be able to run without him.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.” Jacqueline and Dustin were saying at the same time. The next moment, Mike was tripping over

one of the vines and screaming for help.

“Mike!” Dustin and Steve ran to him as the thing wrapped around Mike’s leg, Steve repeatedly slamming his bat into it until it let go of Mike. How she had survived down there without that ever happening to her, Jacqueline didn’t know.

Before they made it much farther, a loud screeching signaled that there was a monster behind them.

“Holy shit!” She breathed out, pushing one of the kids behind her. Steve stepped toward it before Dustin called it by the name Dart. The other kids and Steve were shouting for him to get away from the thing.

“Trust me, please,” he told them before approaching it. “Hey. It’s me, it’s me. It’s your friend, it’s Dustin.”

Jacqueline watched with wide eyes as he talked to it and fed Dart candy bars. This was like his pet or something? She met eyes with Steve and gave him a confused look. “Really?” She whispered. She had a lot of questions.

Once they were able to pass Dart, it looked like they had a straight shot to the exit, but then the floor started to rumble. The redheaded girl fell to the ground with the shake and Jacqueline reached forward, helping her up. She barely had any strength herself, but she wasn’t going to let the younger girl get caught up in the vines the way Mike had.

“Are you okay?” She asked. The girl nodded.

“What was that?” The girl said when the sound of more screeching and roaring reached them.

“They’re coming!” Mike said. “Run! Run!”

Steve tugged her along and Jacqueline ran as hard as her legs would allow to the rope. The younger girl was the first one up, followed by Lucas and Mike. Steve called up for the kids to pull Jacqueline up with the rope.

"No, let Dustin go," She said, but both boys refused and she grabbed onto the rope, gripping it tightly with her feet as the other three pulled her up.

"Throw it back down!" Steve said. Once Jacqueline was up, Lucas tossed it back and she laid out on the ground, looking up at the star-filled sky. It was the best thing she'd seen in days. A few seconds later, the girl came over and sat down with her, observing her face.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

"Yes, I am now."

"I'm Max," she said.

"Jac."

She took a few deep breaths and rubbed her hands together. It was still cold, she was still freezing, but it was better than being down there. But where were Steve and Dustin? She rolled her head to watch the hole and that was when the boys started yelling down for them.

"What's wrong?" She asked, trying to push herself up with her arms and failing.

"Go," Steve said, motioning for Dustin to go to the rope. As soon as his hands wrapped around it, the demo-dogs came into sight, running in their direction and coming at high speed.

"Oh, shit. Oh, shit." Dustin's eyes widened beneath his goggles and Steve lifted up his bat, ready to take these things out, or at least try.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, not sure if he wanted Dustin to hear the words. Steve was sure they were going to be eaten alive. On the one hand, he was just relieved that Jacqueline was okay. On the other, Dustin was still down in the tunnels with him.

The impact never came. They weren't being torn apart. The demo-dogs were running past them. A huge grin formed on Dustin's face and Steve once again pushed him to the rope. Dustin went up and

then Steve climbed out, taking off his gear and moving to where Jacqueline was laying on the ground. Max was on her knees next to her. His stomach sank, thinking something was wrong with her judging by the worry on Max's face. But when she saw him, Max smiled and said something to Jacqueline.

He reached them and Max moved so he could take her spot. Placing Jacqueline's head in his lap, he was able to get a good look at her. Her face was pale and her lips had a blue tint to them, but she was alive. She was okay.

"Hey," he said, watching her eyes open at his voice. "How you doing?"

"I've been better." Her voice was tired. She reached up and ran a finger across his chin. "Your face looks terrible."

Before he could respond, her eyes closed again.

11. Chapter Eleven

Summary for the Chapter:

Jacqueline was out of the Upside Down, but it didn't mean things would be easy.

Steve drove them to the hospital. He thought about letting Max drive again so he could stay in the back with Jacqueline, but he didn't want to chance them all dying. And, anyway, at least he had his driver's license. Max, Mike, and Lucas sat squished in the backseat with Jacqueline squeezed between Max and Lucas. She was passed out, or asleep, he wasn't sure, but she was breathing. Her lips were returning to their normal color, too, so that was a good sign. The heat in Billy's car barely worked, just spitting out a little heat, but Dustin had suggested they turn it on to try to help her warm up. Steve had been too in his own head to think about doing that, so once again it was a help that those kids were with him.

"Stay in the car," he said, pulling into the hospital parking lot. "It'll look suspicious if we all go in."

"It's going to look suspicious anyway," Dustin responded. "Have you seen your face? Or your clothes? You probably need to get checked out."

Lucas nodded. "What if you have a concussion?"

"I'll worry about that later. I need to get her in first."

He got out and opened the back door, catching Mike as he fell out of the car.

"Come on, help me get her out." It didn't escape him that they'd been to the hospital after everything with the Demogorgon last year and she had been sleep deprived then, too, but this time was different. She'd gone without food or drink for several days. God, she was lucky to be alive.

Steve had never been so thankful for anything in his life.

Once the kids moved around, he picked Jacqueline up with an arm under her legs and one around her back.

“Stay here.” They let out a collective groan and Steve fixed them with a stare. “Don’t do anything stupid.” Then he passed Max the keys, just in case.

Jacqueline woke up when she tried to move her arm and it tugged on something. For a moment, she didn’t know where she was, and a loud gasp escaped her throat as her eyes flickered around the room. Her eyes adjusted to the light and she began to relax. There was an IV sticking out of her arm and one of her fingers was wrapped in a bandage. The smell of the overly sanitized room stung her nose. She hated hospitals, but it was better than where she was hours before. At least she thought it had been hours. Glancing at her side, she spotted Steve in the chair next to the bed. She thought he was asleep.

“Steve?”

His eyes opened at her words and he quickly stood up. Worry lines creased his forehead.

“You’re awake,” he said in relief. “Do you feel okay?”

“Water?”

He picked up the cup next to the bed and she took it thankfully, sipping it. Her throat burned as she swallowed, but it was a welcome feeling to be experiencing drinking again. It was something human. Handing it back to him, Jacqueline pushed herself to lay more comfortably against the pillows.

“Yeah, I feel better. I’m not cold anymore.” How could she be? There were at least 5 blankets draped on top of her. She wondered how much of that had been Steve’s doing.

“The doctor said you had hypothermia.” Steve sighed and ran a hand

over his bruised face, wincing at the action. "I was so worried about you, Jac."

"I was worried about me, too." She attempted to joke until she tired he was and the concern filling his eyes, and just how broken his face was. "What happened to your face this time? You need to see the doctor, Steve."

"No, I'm good. And, it doesn't matter." Oh, he was going to be stubborn. Jacqueline fixed him with a glare. "It's a long story."

"Tell me. I'm not going anywhere."

He sighed and plonked down into the chair. "I got into a fight with Billy Hargrove."

"Why?" She asked, dragging out the word. If she wasn't already in a bed, she might've fallen. All she could hope was that it had nothing to do with her.

For the next few minutes, Steve recounted the entire situation, starting with realizing she was missing to running into Dustin and helping him search Dart while Steve searched for her, and ending with his fight at the Byers' house with Billy. It was a lot to take in.

"Wow," she said, at a loss for words. "He did all that?"

"I threw the first punch," he said, shrugging his shoulders. There was a proud smile on his lips.

She smirked at him. "Good boy." With a yawn, she rested her head on the pillow before sitting up suddenly. "My-my mom! Did you call her?"

"Yeah, she's on her way."

She shot him an appreciative look and settled down again. "Thanks. She must've been so worried."

"She was, but Hopper told her to stay home, not go out and try to find you alone or anything."

They both knew what could have happened, how all of this could have ended, and the thought that her mom had been alone during all of it broke her heart. The fact that she thought Jacqueline was just missing and not understanding it all made her feel sick.

“What exactly did he tell her?”

“Nothing, at least nothing about the Upside Down.” Steve reached forward and started playing with the hand she had resting on the bed. “What do you want to tell her? It’s up to you, you know.”

Jacqueline grasped his fingers. “I don’t know. Do I want her to know what’s out there?”

Steve didn’t answer. It was her decision. There was no going back if she told her mom how messed up Hawkins was, but she also didn’t want to lie to her. It didn’t escape her that trying to keep her mother safe was not something most teenage girls had to do. But that was the reality of it all. Jacqueline was out of the Upside Down, but it didn’t mean things would be easy. Joyce Byers knew what was out there and had almost lost her youngest son because of it. If anyone would know what to say, it would be Joyce.

“She wouldn’t believe me if I told her I got lost in the woods.” Again, she tried to lighten the mood, but one glimpse at Steve’s eyes and she could see how much of a toll this had also taken on him. She scooted over on the bed as much as she could without falling off the edge. It was small, being a hospital bed, but they could both fit. “Hey, come here.”

He looked at her, unsure.

“I’m still cold,” she lied. He had to have known she was lying, but he didn’t say anything. She just needed her best friend as close as she could get him. She wanted that look in his eyes to go away.

She situated herself so she could they both had room, then Steve climbed onto the bed. His arm went around her shoulders. With a contented sigh from them both, they relaxed on top of the bed.

“Thank you for not giving up on finding me,” she whispered a few

moments later, but her only response was a soft snore from him.

When Jacqueline's mom got there, she and Steve were still asleep. But as soon as the doctor who walked in with her started talking, Steve sat up in bed. The movement jostled Jacqueline from her sleep and she groaned.

"Sorry," Steve whispered to her. Neither of the adults said anything as Steve scrambled off the bed. It took her a moment to see why he was even moving, but when she saw her mom, she just knew she had to tell her everything. Her mom deserved to know the truth.

"Jackie, I was so worried about you!"

"I'm okay, I promise."

Suddenly her mom was taking Steve's spot next to the bed and the doctor was getting his stethoscope prepared. Smiling shakily at her mom, Jacqueline let her fuss over her for a few moments, all the while swearing that she was fine. She caught Steve's eye when he got to the door.

"I need to go do something. I'll be back."

She didn't want him to leave, but she nodded anyway. Didn't have a choice when the doctor was asking her to sit up so he could check her vitals.

"It's been like an hour!" Dustin shouted when Steve was closer to the Camaro.

"Sorry. Geez, I had to wait for her mom to get here." So, maybe he should have let them come into the hospital too since it was November, but he could only focus on so many things at one time. He wasn't going to mention that he'd also taken a short nap while in the hospital.

Getting in the car, he held out his hand for the keys and Max passed them to him.

“Is she okay?” Max asked, voice full of concern. It amazed Steve that this girl could worry so much about a stranger, and not even blink an eye about her own brother. Something felt off there.

He looked over his shoulder at the kids in the backseat. “She’s good. She was dehydrated and had hypothermia, some scratches, and bruises, but she’ll be out in a couple days.”

Max smiled softly at Steve and turned to Lucas, who sent her a smile of his own. Mike nodded. “That’s great. Can we go now? I need to know if El is okay, too.”

“Oh, sure, yeah.” Steve started the ignition and pulled out of the parking lot. He would take them all back to the Byers’ house, find out about Eleven, Will, and he guessed Billy, and then get his car. He wasn’t planning on leaving Jacqueline’s side for long.

Jacqueline had only been in the hospital overnight and she couldn’t wait to be home. She had been away for far too long. She’d insisted that her mom go ahead and go to work that day even though there were still some things she needed to tell her about what happened, but she wasn’t ready. Once she did, everything normal left in their lives was gone. Her mom had been reluctant to leave her at the hospital, but she felt better than she had in days. There was food that was edible and she’d had all the sleep she could handle. No nightmares so far either. Plus, Steve had brought her Walkman, a stack of tapes, and extra batteries, so she was doing pretty well considering.

Steve was in and out. It was a school day and, despite all of the craziness that had been going on, it was important that they at least try to keep up a normal routine.

“You don’t have to be here all the time,” she said. “You need to

graduate.”

He just shrugged and told her to rest, propping his feet up on the bed. She knocked them down with her hand. His resulting laugh caused her heart to speed up, but he grabbed his jacket and left for school anyway.

They hadn't talked much about what was going on in his personal life since Halloween, only that he and Nancy had officially broken up, so she wasn't surprised when Nancy and Jonathan came in together that day after school.

“Hey.” She smiled happily at her two friends. Jonathan was carrying two books, which he placed on the bed when he rushed over to her. Then he hugged her tight like he hadn't seen her in years. “Jonathan, you're squeezing me,” she whispered, hugging him back despite the IV still stuck in her arm.

“Thought you might need something to focus on while you wait to go home,” Jonathan said, pulling back and gesturing to the books.

“Thanks, Jon.” She grabbed one of the books and looked at the front and back covers before putting it down on her lap. “I don't think I'll be here much longer.”

She focused her attention on Nancy and the girl came over awkwardly, giving her a quick hug.

“I'm happy you're okay,” the girl said, and it was obvious by the look in her eyes just how relieved she was. Jacqueline and Nancy might not have been as close as Nancy and Barb, but she knew that Nancy had been through a lot the past couple of years with two of her friends going missing.

“Thanks. I didn't mean to worry everyone.” Jacqueline sighed. “I know better than to go off on my own at night now.”

“That's over,” Nancy said fiercely. “We don't have to worry about that anymore. This will never happen again.”

It was difficult to believe that it was all over when, just a day before, she was trapped in the Upside Down feeling like she was going to die

down there. But she wanted to trust that everything was going to be better.

“Yeah, I hope so.”

Before any of them could say anything else, Steve rounded the corner with his arms full of her school books.

“I got all of your homework,” he said, stopping in his tracks at the sight of Nancy and Jonathan standing by the bed. “Oh, hey, guys.”

The four teens regarded each other, waiting for someone else to speak first. If anyone else walked in, they would be able to feel the tension. Jacqueline sighed and locked eyes with Steve.

“Thanks for getting my homework,” she said, rolling her eyes playfully when he grinned at her. Ignoring the others, he stepped over to the bed and put it all on the bedside table.

“Couldn’t let you fail.” He shrugged and sat down. “I brought mine too. Figured we could do our homework together, like old times.”

“Sure.”

Jonathan made a face at her and she shooed him away with her hand, secretly pleased when he and Nancy left with a wave and a promise to check in later. Steve was obviously still uncomfortable. It took a few minutes for him to perk back up again. She didn’t say anything about it as they started their homework.

When he rested his head on the bed, her hand found its way into his hair and she smiled when he didn’t protest. He mocked a snore. “Just keep doing that,” he said with a sigh.

She rolled her eyes and tugged gently, giggling when he rolled his head toward her, sticking his tongue out. It was stupid that he still made her heart race.

12. Chapter Twelve

Summary for the Chapter:

It was difficult being this vulnerable in front of someone, but things were different with Steve.

Jacqueline was discharged from the hospital two days later. Physically, she was fine. Going home was a huge relief, but surprisingly all she wanted to do was sleep. But coming home brought on the nightmares.

Each one started happily, but suddenly it turned into a terror. One second she was running and laughing and the next she was falling down into the tunnels. It was a sick and twisted version of *Alice in Wonderland*.

She would wake up with either a silent scream stuck in her throat or tears streaming down her face. It was impossible to sleep peacefully after that if she was able to fall asleep again at all. The worst part was waking up alone. It was important to Jacqueline that her mom never knew the extent of the effects of the Upside Down. It was hard enough for the woman to learn where her daughter was for days when they finally sat down and Jacqueline explained the last year, so she wasn't going to burden her.

Steve wasn't an option. Last year, she could walk to his house in the middle of the night, but now she was afraid to go out alone. There was a part of her that felt like something was still there. What, she didn't know, but she couldn't shake the feeling.

So she suffered silently, sneaking in short naps after school and wearing extra concealer under her eyes.

That worked for a while on most people. It worked on her teachers, classmates, even her mom, but Steve was not most people.

One day, when he was at her house after school, Jacqueline accidentally fell asleep on the couch. They weren't watching the TV, but it provided the perfect white noise in the background while Steve

talked about “The Kids.” It was sweet the way he was growing attached to them in the week after the Dart fiasco and the tunnels. He was hanging out with them all the time and brought them over so they could see with their own eyes that she was okay. He was in the middle of a story about how Max and Eleven were having difficulties being friends when she drifted off. It wasn’t intentional. Steve’s voice mixing with the hum of the TV was the ideal combination to fill her with the warmth necessary to fall asleep.

Just like that, she was thrust into her new norm.

Someone was chasing her, but she couldn’t see their face, and she wasn’t scared of them. She was happy. The sun was bright and warm on her skin and then it wasn’t. She was falling, falling, falling into the black of the tunnels and shivering at the sudden change of temperature.

As soon as she hit the ground, she knew something was coming, but there was no way to get out. She ran. Stumbling around, she tried to make her way through the tunnels looking for an exit. The rope! If she could get to it, she would be able to climb out. She was gasping for breath and couldn’t see a thing, but she found it with her hands. Grabbing it, she started to climb. Light surrounded her as she moved up and she realized that it wasn’t a rope at all. “No!” She tried to jump down off of the vine. It wrapped around her wrist as other vines came out of nowhere to grasp hold of her and pull her down. “No! Help!” They were taking her straight into the Demogorgon’s waiting, open mouth.

With a yelp, she woke up. Her eyes opened and she could feel hands on her, but it took a few seconds to focus on her surroundings. The first thing she noticed was the TV, the second was Steve’s voice.

“Hey. Hey, Jac, look at me.”

She couldn’t breathe. Something was around her throat. A whimper escaped her throat and she brought her hands up to her neck. There was nothing there. Her wide eyes met Steve’s concerned ones as he pulled her up to sit.

“You’re okay. You’re home.”

She was still breathing hard, taking in shallow breaths, but his words snapped her out of the haze of the nightmare.

She was okay.

She was home.

Steve's hands moved from her shoulders to her cheeks and he wiped away the tears she didn't know were on her skin. Closing her eyes, she focused on catching her breath.

"Better?" Steve asked. He was still in the same place in front of her when she opened her eyes.

"Yeah. It wasn't real."

"No, it wasn't." It was ridiculous that freaking out in front of him embarrassed her. There was no judgment on his face, though. He smoothed her hair back and told her he'd go get her some water. While she waited, she gave herself a second to breathe deeply. She was okay.

It was difficult being this vulnerable in front of someone, but things were different with Steve. He was there when she started her period for the first time and neither of them knew what was happening. They thought she was dying until she remembered a book her mom bought for her 12th birthday. Once they figured it out, it was obvious that it grossed him out, but he'd played it off the only way a thirteen-year-old boy could by not meeting her eye for a couple of days. After that, she figured there was nothing Steve couldn't handle when it came to her.

"I didn't think you were sleeping," he said, moving to sit next to her, handing her the glass. One of his hands found her arm. "You almost fell asleep in English today."

"I did not," she muttered before taking a sip of water. "It's just boring."

"It's one of your favorites." He moved his hand from her arm to wrap it around her shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me?"

“What was I supposed to say? It’s not like you can be here all the time.”

“I can camp out in your room.”

Jacqueline let out a breath that sounded like a laugh. Fitting her head into the crook of his shoulder, she sighed.

“I’ll be okay. They’ll go away soon.” Her other nightmares were gone, replaced by teenage angst. Almost as scary, but less life-threatening. But, now that she slept for all of ten minutes, she was more exhausted than before. “Steve?”

He made a noise of acknowledgment.

“Will you take a nap with me?” She asked quietly.

It was weird. They’d slept in the same bed several times over the last six years of knowing each other, at the very least in the same room, but this time felt different. There was a desperation in her voice like she *needed* him. There was also a longing there that was new to him.

Steve wordlessly stood from the couch and took her hand, leading her to her own room. Instead of Jacqueline’s usual routine of pulling down the comforter and throwing some of the pillows to the floor, she only put the glass down and kicked off her shoes before laying down on the made bed. For once, he wasn’t sure what to do. Climb in behind her or sit down on the bed? Was he just supposed to guard her while she slept?

Jacqueline looked at him with a familiar impatience on her face. He took off his own shoes and settled behind her, keeping a little space between their bodies. She reached back and blindly grabbed his arm, tugging him closer. It didn’t escape his notice how well they molded together. Wrapping his arm around her, he tucked his fingers under her body, holding her back snug to his front.

There was nothing particularly sexual about it (well, a little, but that was a given), but it felt right. She was safe and she was home.

She was with him.

He couldn't stand the thought of her being anywhere else.

When Jacqueline woke up, Steve was gone which was a surprise. That was the last thing she expected after his reaction to her nightmares. But when she rolled over, he was sitting against the headboard with one of the books Jonathan brought her in his hands. It was clear he was only flipping through the pages.

"What time is it?" She asked, disoriented. The lamp next to her bed was on, but otherwise, she couldn't tell if it was even the same day. She moved to her back and stretched out, closing her eyes again. It took her a few moments to adjust to being awake, but when she did, she turned to see the sky was dark through her bedroom window.

"It's like 6," he answered before putting the book back and moving to mirror her. "Did you have any nightmares?"

She shook her head in response. It wasn't the most refreshing nap, but it was uninterrupted sleep. Mostly, she couldn't believe she slept for 2 hours. She couldn't be sure if it was Steve's presence or she was too exhausted to not give into sleep, but it could be both.

"No, it was fine. I feel better."

When she opened her eyes and looked at him, Steve was watching her with a look she couldn't decipher.

"What?"

"I was just thinking," he said and she raised an eyebrow.

"You, thinking?"

"First of all, rude. Second, yeah. I was thinking about how nervous I was when you were missing, but now I feel relieved." He shook his head, looking unhappy with his choice of words. "It's more than that, though. I'm thankful that you're home, like in a way I didn't know was possible."

"Now you know what to say at Thanksgiving," she said softly, trying and failing to ignore the butterflies suddenly erupting in her stomach.

She was probably reading too much into his words, but she could have sworn there was something else behind his words.

Steve rolled his eyes, but he was smiling, and somehow that created even more tension in her body. Jacqueline stretched again in the hopes of easing it. He reached forward and tugged a strand of her hair. Their proximity did nothing to help her, but she couldn't exactly complain about it.

"I am thankful for you," he said, tone matching his from moments before, and she almost turned away to avoid looking at him.

"I'm thankful for you, too." She swatted his hand away half-heartedly before turning her arm and placing her wrist on her forehead pretending to swoon. "My hero."

"Alright, I'm leaving." Steve pushed himself up and Jacqueline sat on the edge of the bed, legs dangling. She laughed when she spotted the fake annoyance on his face. Yes, she was joking, but she was sure that she wouldn't have made it out of the tunnels without him and his new group of buddies.

"Thanks for staying." She didn't know what else to say that wasn't too serious or wouldn't take them down a new path, so she leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek. His skin was warm and comforting and she closed her eyes for a moment as she leaned into him.

Steve's heart was doing all sorts of flippy shit and it was getting more obvious as the night went on. He didn't want to leave. It felt like he was going to make a wrong move and Jacqueline would be gone again. But, more than that, he just wanted to be there with her all night and hear her voice. They could lay on her bed and he'd know she was really there.

Then she kissed his cheek, leaving him confused. The action itself wasn't that unusual, but it felt like this time there was a meaning behind it. He just didn't know what she was trying to tell him.

The room was silent as Jacqueline got up and moved around her

room, arranging this and fixing that. Her room was already clean so he knew she was nervous. Knowing her for six years meant he knew most of her habits, so he wasn't too surprised that she was suddenly doing this after opening up to him so much. If either of them was the emotional one, it was Steve.

But sometimes he just couldn't take it, so he walked over and took a candle from her, putting it back in its place.

"What's wrong?"

Jacqueline looked up at him like she forgot he was there before her eyes softened. She brought a hand up to massage between her eyes.

"What if I never sleep well again? I feel kind of hazy all the time already."

"Hey, it'll be fine. Your other nightmares went away, remember? You said it yourself. They always get better."

"Look what happened to Will, Steve. There could something else waiting for me."

"No!" He gripped her shoulders and forced her to meet his gaze. "That won't happen because I won't let it. You've seen me with that bat. All monsters should be scared of *me*."

Jacqueline relaxed under his hands and looked at his face. One look at her and he knew what she was thinking. Yeah, he was still bruised up and a little swollen from Billy's beating, but he still meant every word he said. He would go down fighting for her.

"I believe you," she said, eyes moving from his cheek to his lips and back to his eyes. Hers were so sincere. There was something else there in her eyes that caused his breath to catch in his throat.

"So, that's the end of that," he said after, still trying to figure out that look in her eyes. "You'll be back to normal soon."

He was still holding her arms and he released her when he realized that she might want to actually be able to move, but she stayed rooted to her spot.

“What about you? Will you be back to normal soon?” She swallowed.
“I mean, with Nancy.”

It was the first time either of them brought up Nancy since the day she and Jonathan were at the hospital when he got there. Now that she started the conversation, he couldn't help but deflate a bit.

He moved back to her bed.

“I guess I'm already feeling a little better, and I know I shouldn't be, but I don't know. It's not that I'm over it, but I think I get why we didn't work. Maybe we weren't meant to.” He ran a hand through his hair. Jacqueline walked back over and grabbed his hand, holding it between hers. She knew his habits, too, it seemed.

“Why?”

“She loves someone else and I - I wasn't all in like I thought I was.”

Jacqueline watched him with confusion written all over her face. He turned his eyes to her ceiling as he thought about what he wanted to tell her. Was he ready to tell her about all of his conflicting and complex feelings yet? He'd almost done it once before. “How were you not all in?”

“Maybe I wasn't ready to, ugh.” He tried to move his hand to head again, only to feel her holding him still. “I wasn't ready to open up a certain part of my heart for her.”

Jacqueline let go of his hand then and he watched her eyes light up.

“Wow. That was oddly poetic.”

“Shut up.” He ran his hands through his hair, but this time it was to fix the mess it became between sleep and his nervousness. “Let's talk about something else.”

She got back on the bed and sat cross-legged while he turned his body, dropping down on the bed with his hand propping up his head.

“What were you saying earlier about El and Max? I didn't catch all of it.”

"Max is having trouble fitting into the group. I don't think El likes having her around."

"She's jealous?"

"I think. She barely talks to Max and, when she does, she's kind of snappy. Sometimes Max just gets up and leaves."

Jacqueline raised her eyebrows and fiddled with a loose thread on her jeans. "I can relate," she murmured, probably more to herself than him.

"Could you talk to her? Just, you know, find out if she's okay and tell her how you dealt with all that."

"I highly doubt my friendship with Carol and Nicole is a good example of loving female bonding." She shrugged. "We were never that close."

"But, still, you know what it's like to be a girl. I don't."

"Okay, I'll talk to her."

"Thanks."

"It's fine, but I can't promise anything will change, and I'd rather not confront El."

"She might throw something at you *with her mind*." His eyes widened and Jacqueline laughed, pushing his shoulder gently. He held the comforter to keep from falling off the bed.

"Sorry!" Her laugh got louder as she grabbed his arm, tugging him toward her. He kept himself from falling on top of her and settled back down, his head nudging her knee. "If you take me with you to hang out with The Kids, I'll talk to Max."

"You got it," he whispered, once again trying to calm the beating of his heart. As much as he told himself that it was from almost falling, he knew it wasn't true. It was all Jacqueline.

13. Chapter Thirteen, Part One

Summary for the Chapter:

Chancing a glance over at Jacqueline, he found her eyes already on his face. She knew what he was thinking, but he couldn't tell what was on her mind.

Notes for the Chapter:

One more chapter! I can't believe it's almost over. Please tell me what you think of this one. The two movies mentioned in this may not have been on VHS at the time, but work with me. I haven't been able to find good sources for those release dates. I do not own *Stranger Things*, any of its characters, or dialogue.

On top of Jacqueline's sleep schedule being messed up, getting back to her life was an adjustment. In some ways, falling back into a routine of classes and homework was a relief. She even started to believe all the strange stuff in Hawkins was over.

The kids were a big help. Steve was a good judge of character now evidently and she and Will naturally bonded. It helped that they already knew each other since she and Jonathan were friends, and she knew just how much he had suffered in the last year. All of the kids were cool in their ways, but Will was extraordinary. When the Party came to Steve's after school, or they hung out with them at Dustin's house, she and Will could sit for hours drawing. It wasn't her best skill, but Will always gave her such heartwarming and honest critiques of her work. She hadn't been through half of his experience and some days she felt utterly broken. Will, though, was thriving and it helped her feel like things were going okay.

Then there was Steve.

Steve was a constant in her life, the good and bad parts, and he continued to be her best friend and so much more. Sometimes she woke up in Steve's car and he was just waiting for her to wake up

before taking her home - it was weird, but comforting that he didn't say anything about it. He was there in the afternoon when she needed to get out of her head, some nights when she was too afraid to sleep alone, and always ready to go see a movie or just hang out.

She loved him still, probably always would, but sometimes it didn't matter that he didn't feel the same way. He was there and that was more important.

But school was a struggle.

She was only out of school for a week, and no one but Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan knew what happened, but it didn't stop the stares and whispers. Everyone wanted to know what she was doing that week. They wouldn't ask, of course. That would be too easy and would ruin all the rumors. She heard all sorts of theories (kidnapped, older boyfriend, older *married* boyfriend, abortion), but the best one came out of Billy's mouth.

"Heard you were abducted by aliens."

Jacqueline snorted but refused to look at him. It was bad enough he made her uncomfortable, but after what he did to Steve and knowing he scared Max, she wanted nothing to do with him. She grabbed her books out of her locker and slammed the door without a word. He began to talk again when she turned on her heel and walked away.

Steve was waiting at the door of their next class. It was obvious by the way he was looking, more like glaring, down the hall that he saw Billy talking to her.

"It's not a big deal," she said before he could ask. "He wasn't messing with me. He knows not to." She smirked. "Did I tell you about the time I slapped him?" Glancing over, she spotted the look of disbelief on his face, his mouth open in surprise. As the bell rang, she patted his chest and rounded him to get into the classroom.

The plan was for Steve to take her home that day after school since her mom drove the car to work, but when she got to the parking lot, he was leaning against the driver's side door. She immediately knew

what that meant - change of plans. Otherwise, he would have waited at her locker.

It wasn't until she was closer that she noticed Lucas, Dustin, and Max already in the backseat.

"Hey." She waved at the younger teens before focusing on Steve. "What's up?"

"Change of plans."

She inwardly smiled before she captured her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Good plans?"

"Yeah! Yeah." Steve nodded quickly and held out his hand in front of himself, almost like telling her to calm down, before he opened his door. She walked over to the passenger side before doing the same.

"What do you say to a movie at my place?" He asked, starting the ignition.

"Yeah, sure. My mom won't be home until late anyway." Jacqueline shrugged, pulling on the seatbelt. "Sounds good."

Steve glanced over at her with a soft look on his face and she smiled before turning in her seat and looking back to the other three.

"Hi."

They all said their own version of hello to her, Dustin's excited, Lucas' the most subdued, and Max's timid.

"Are you coming, too?" She asked, not worrying if Steve invited them or not. It was normal for them to all hang out together.

Dustin nodded. "We're stopping at the video store on our way there. Steve said we can all pick out our own movie."

She caught a smile and Steve's blush out of the corner of her eye.

“Sounds like we’re in for a long night then.”

Steve was already on the road by the time the conversation finished, so she reached forward to turn on the radio, pushing in the tape already sticking out of the tape deck. It was her tape, but Steve had driven her to school so she brought a few of her favorites for the ride. As the first chords reached her ears, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

The kids separated from them at the door, Mike and Dustin hurrying over to the Science Fiction section and Lucas and Max walking around to look at the new releases. There was something nostalgic about watching them so excited about getting to pick a movie and the thought brought a small smile to Jacqueline’s face. It was relaxing to be around that sort of happiness.

“What are you smiling at?”

“I remember being so excited when this store opened.” She shrugged and made her way over to the new releases a few paces behind Lucas and Max. Steve groaned when she picked up *Grease 2*.

“You said they could choose their movies. What about me?” Another groan escaped Steve’s mouth, but when she looked over at him, he had a smile on his lips.

“Fine, but we’re watching it last.”

“Works for me.”

Jacqueline happily pushed the VHS case into Steve’s chest and walked on after the kids.

Steve caught up with her in just a few strides and nudged her with his elbow. “You okay?”

She knew he meant her sleep and she shrugged. There was no doubt he caught her dozing off in his car on the way to the store, but things were starting to get better. The nightmares were lessening in intensity as the weeks went on, but it was still difficult to get a full night’s sleep most nights.

"I'm... adjusting." Tilting her head to the side to look at him, she smiled reassuringly. Maybe it was for herself, maybe it was for him. "They'll be gone soon."

This seemed to satisfy him and he nodded, moving over to the registers to choose some movie snacks.

"Anything but 3 Musketeers," she heard him mutter and she snickered at his words. Steve glanced at her with a grin. "It's World War III when they're mentioned."

Jacqueline smiled and continued to peruse the sections. It was a new experience to witness Steve become protective and caring about the group of kids, but it was sweet. Even if it served as something else to add to the list of reasons she still loved him.

Max and Lucas were nearby and she heard the two giggling quietly to one another. It reminded her of what Steve told her about Max's issues with El. She still hadn't talked to her yet, so she caught up with them.

"Lucas, you mind if I steal Max away from a few minutes?" She turned to Max. "If that's okay with you and if you already chose your movie."

Max nodded. "Sure!" It was obvious by the way Max's cheeks began to turn red that it embarrassed her to agree so quickly, but Jacqueline just smiled and led her to the registers where Steve was still going through the candy. She held her out to him without a word. He peeked over her shoulder and spotted Max, handing over his keys.

"Do you like Hawkins?" Jacqueline shook her head before continuing. "Other than all the strange stuff."

Max shrugged. "It's okay. I miss California, but some things are cool here."

"Some things or some people?"

"The people are better."

"Yeah, Lucas and Dustin are pretty cool. I don't know them much, but they've always been nice to me, especially with the tunnels and everything."

Max looked out the backseat window and then back to Jacqueline.

"What about Mike and El? You hang out with them, too, right?" Jacqueline asked.

At this, the girl's demeanor changed slightly. Her shoulders drooped and she sighed just enough for Jacqueline to hear it escape her lips.

"I want us to be friends, but I don't think they like me."

"Why not?"

"Eleven doesn't talk to me much and, when she does, it's like she doesn't want to. Mike is just always by her side, so he doesn't talk to me that much either."

It was the exact story Steve gave her and she thought about how perceptive he was to other people. It was a wonder he didn't realize how she felt about him.

"Have you ever tried to talk to Eleven alone? It's a boy's club and she was the new one before you, so I'm sure the two of you have a lot in common. She could be jealous that there's someone new or she might think you were taking her spot while she was gone."

"I don't have powers like her."

Jacqueline nodded and said, "But she's not a Zoomer like you. I heard about you driving everyone to the tunnels." Both of their smiles grew. "Hopefully you'll never have to fight anything again, but, if you did, you could be a good pair."

"I don't know, maybe." Max was still watching her, blue eyes wide as she spoke. "But I still don't think she likes me."

"Maybe not." Jacqueline knew the words were harsh, but it was better to be honest. "Lucas and Dustin like you, though, so sometimes you may have to tough it out."

“Even if I want to leave?”

“Yes. Trust me, running away can’t solve all your problems.” She thought briefly back on her running away from her friendship with Steve only to be thrust back into it because of the Demogorgon. “Your friendship with Lucas and Dustin should mean more than how Eleven and Mike treat you. I know it’s hard, but they’ll be there for you.”

Max nodded.

“And, if you ever need to complain, you can tell me or Steve. Don’t tell him I told you, but he’s a good listener.”

“What’s going on with you and Steve?” Max asked and Jacqueline’s breath caught in her throat.

“He’s my best friend,” she said evenly.

“I, um, I heard Billy talking with a girl from the high school one day. She said you were really popular until Steve started dating Mike’s sister.”

“That’s a long story and more complicated than it sounds.” Jacqueline looked out the window to see if the others were coming to the car yet. “It doesn’t change that Steve is just my best friend.”

“Were you jealous?”

“I didn’t want to be in that group anymore. They weren’t good friends, even Steve.”

Jacqueline knew opening up would help Max feel comfortable, but she couldn’t find it in herself to open her mouth about this. If she did, she was sure it would get back to Lucas or Dustin, and then Steve. She wasn’t ready.

“Steve is my friend, Max,” she said once more, meeting the redhead’s eyes. “That’s all.”

Jacqueline said she was doing better, but Steve wasn’t buying it. It

wasn't that he thought she was lying, exactly, but he was still concerned. Even if she sleep wasn't as bad as it had been, he still noticed her tired eyes. The fact that she almost fell asleep in his car most mornings and afternoon was a clear sign things were still tough.

By the time Dustin and Lucas had their movies picked out, all going on his dad's credit card since his parents were gone once again, Jacqueline and Max were already back in his car. He didn't want to interrupt them in case Jacqueline was trying to talk to the younger girl about Eleven, but the boys, especially Dustin, were ready to go. They practically ran out to the car in excitement while he was grabbing the bags from the clerk. One with the movies and one with all the popcorn and snacks he'd picked out for them.

The three of them got back in and, like that, the girls' conversation halted. He sent Jacqueline a look he hoped conveyed "What were you talking about?" but she avoided his gaze.

He looked back at Max as the boys buckled themselves up, but she also ignored his look. Okay. Either their conversation hadn't gone well or it ended up being more awkward than expected.

The car ride to his house was full of talking in the backseat and the faint sounds of Jacqueline's mixtape. She still didn't look at him until they pulled up in his driveway.

"Wow," Max muttered and he couldn't help the nerves floating up in his stomach. It wasn't often he felt self-conscious about his upbringing, as far as the house and money went, but it reminded him of being King Steve. He probably never would have had the title if it wasn't for him being considered a rich boy. There was a lot a perpetually living alone teenager with a big house could offer his classmates. But he hoped the kids could see him as something else, just Steve.

Chancing a glance over at Jacqueline, he found her eyes already on his face. She knew what he was thinking, but he couldn't tell what was on her mind.

Dustin, Lucas, and Max jumped out of the car and all quickly made their way to the front door, leaving him and Jacqueline to follow.

Jacqueline was still silent. Maybe she was tired, or her conversation with Max had shocked her into silence.

He didn't have to wait long for an answer. Once they stepped into the house, Jacqueline turned to him as she removed her coat.

"Mind if I go up to your room for a while?" She asked, eyes darting from his to a painting in the entryway.

He shook his head and followed her lead, slipping out of his jacket. "Go ahead."

"Is something wrong with Jacqueline?" Dustin asked as he came into the kitchen ten minutes later. Steve was trying to make the popcorn for the movies, but Jacqueline had managed to catch him off guard. Her behavior was confusing, to say the least.

"She's just tired."

"Max thinks she said something that made her mad."

Steve shook his head and grabbed a couple bowls before turning back to the boy. "Jacqueline's not mad." He didn't think she was. "She needed some sleep."

"Are you sure you shouldn't go up and check on her?"

Steve took the first bag of popcorn out of the microwave and put in the second, pressing the buttons to time the machine. He turned to Dustin and frowned. Maybe he was right.

"What did Max say?"

"Some girl Billy took home one day said something about her, about the two of you." Dustin was clearly uncomfortable with the conversation, but he kept talking. "She said Jacqueline was jealous when you started dating Nancy."

"Oh." Steve swallowed and shook his head. "No, she wasn't."

"Well, Max thinks she's mad."

“Tell Max she’s fine, okay? She won’t be mad at her.”

Steve went up to his room to find Jacqueline laying on his bed. Her eyes were closed, but he could tell she wasn’t asleep by the way her body visibly tense when he came in.

Making his way over to the bed, he thought about Dustin’s words. He’d heard some of those stories before, mostly from Carol and Nicole’s mouths, but it was mostly after Jacqueline stopped hanging out with him. He thought they were just trying to get him riled up. Was it possible Jacqueline was jealous of Nancy? Unlike El with Max, she never said anything mean to Nancy or about her to him, so he never thought about it. What if it was more? The butterflies that had become a normal occurrence for him once again fluttered in his gut at the thought.

He lowered himself onto the bed, but Jacqueline didn’t open her eyes and he stayed silent for a few minutes. Eventually, he couldn’t take it anymore.

“What did Max say?”

Jacqueline let out a breath. It sounded like she had held it for a while.

“Why are you asking?” Her voice shook a bit at her question.

“I just wanted to know why you’re acting like -” He gestured to her, not completely sure what he was trying to say. “Distant.”

Jacqueline studied his face before diverting her gaze.

“It’s not a big deal. We were talking about her and El and then she brought up when we weren’t friends.” She bit her lip and whispered, “I don’t like to think about that.”

Everything about Jacqueline’s behavior made it clear she was lying to him. But why?

“Why aren’t you telling me the truth?”

Her eyes snapped back to his, full of a fire that would have knocked him onto his ass if he wasn't sitting down.

"Steve, it's something I don't think we should talk about."

She sat up quickly on the bed and his sheets pooled around her waist. She was fully clothed, in a sweater and jeans, but it was still a beautiful sight.

"If I tell you, it could ruin us."

He reached forward and placed a hand on her back, splaying his fingers against her shoulder.

"Nothing could ruin us, Jac. Tell me."

A part of Jacqueline couldn't believe Steve was almost demanding she tell him why her conversation with Max upset her so much, but she also knew keeping it from him wasn't a good idea. They were best friends and they weren't supposed to lie to each other. She was just scared to tell him. Did he deserve to know? Probably. Did she have to tell him? No. Still, she took in a calming breath through her nose and began to talk, keeping her back to him.

"Remember the fight I had with Carol?" She didn't wait for a response. "It was about you."

She didn't want to see Steve's reaction, but she needed to so she could know if it was even worth continuing on with her story. God, was she going to tell him? Turning to look over her shoulder, he was sitting there with his brow furrowed in confusion. It wasn't hard to imagine his thoughts. Why would she and Carol fight over him when Carol was with Tommy, and she and Steve never had anything going on? Sure, Carol ran her mouth sometimes, but what could be so bad it would start a fight between them?

He didn't say anything, just sat there staring at her and waiting for her to speak.

"I told her I was going to tell you how I -" Jacqueline stopped to take in a ragged breath and deflected her gaze from him. "I was going to

tell her how I felt about you.”

Her voice came out as a whisper, but she got confirmation he heard her by the way his breath fanned out across her neck.

A moment later, he asked, “How did you feel?”

She wanted to correct him (do, not did, not past tense), but she felt maybe it was best to let him think it was in the past. That way, they could figure out how to move on from it, because she couldn’t lose Steve. She could learn to stop loving him, one day.

“I - Steve, I -” She shook her head quickly and stood up from the bed, hastily wiping her eyes as tears began to fill them. She promised herself she would never let a boy make her cry again, but this time was different. It wasn’t Steve’s fault. This was because she was keeping all these emotions pent-up inside herself. Maybe she needed to let them out. It wasn’t obvious how much until that moment.

“I love you.”

That was the first time she ever said those words to anyone and nervousness coursed through her veins when the words were met with silence. She began to feel overheated. It took a couple of minutes before the sound of the bed creaked and Steve padded across the floor to her. He stopped behind her and ghosted his hands over her arms.

“You do?” The deep tone of his voice almost made her shiver.

“Yes.”

Tears were coming down her face and she lifted a hand to wipe her cheeks, Steve’s hand slipping to her hip.

“Look at me,” he said, stepping closer to her so she could feel his body heat on her back.

This was becoming too much, too fast. His hands, his voice, the way he was speaking like he needed her to say these things. It was hard to think about, but she was sure it was because he was still hurting from Nancy. That was why he wanted to hear her confess. She shook her

head.

“It’s okay. Look at me, please.”

She didn’t turn herself but allowed Steve to guide her body to face him, wrapping her arms around her stomach. When she lifted her eyes to his, it was hard to ignore the look of hope in them.

“I wanted to tell you then, but Carol said I was going to embarrass myself, and she was right.” She lowered her eyes to the carpet. “I should’ve kept this to myself.”

They were silent until Steve spoke up a few minutes later.

“I’m glad you told me, Jac.” His hands caressed her arms and, despite it all, her body relaxed at his touch.

“Why? This is going to mess us up,” she said in disbelief. “It’s not like you feel the same.”

“But I do!”

“No, Steve, you don’t.” Her voice cracked as she spoke. There was no way he felt the same way. He was hurting. “You’re going through a breakup, one you didn’t even want, but you don’t love me.”

“You don’t know that.” His eyes bore into hers and, try as she might, she couldn’t deny his eyes were full of honesty. Of all people, Steve might have been the only person who had never lied to her. But he didn’t love her the same way, that was impossible.

She dropped her head to his shoulder.

“Even if you did, we can’t do this. I’m not a rebound.”

“Never,” he said, but she still knew it wasn’t that simple.

“We need to forget this ever happened.”

“Is that really what you want?”

“Yes,” she said softly against his shirt, the word catching in her

throat.

It was hard to refuse him after all this time, after all the heartbreak being in love with him had brought her, but she didn't want to feel like a second choice. Even if he did care about her, she wasn't Nancy. When she stepped out of his embrace, she met his eyes with guarded ones.

"We're just friends, Steve." She nodded and cupped his cheek. "Let's go downstairs and pretend this never happened."

So they did.

Once she made sure her face didn't look like she'd been crying, they went downstairs together and joined the three younger teens scattered around the living room. Lucas and Max were sitting together in front of the couch while Dustin was off to the side with his eyes glued to the television screen. When she and Steve came into the room, Max's eyes met hers and Jacqueline smiled softly at her.

"It's okay," she mouthed to Max, moving over to the couch to sit behind the girl. Steve settled next to her and she couldn't help but laugh at the movie already playing on the television. "Who's pick was this?" She asked, earning a grin from Dustin. Of course, he would pick *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Without another word, she turned her body to relax further into the couch, stretching her legs over Steve's lap. He looked at her and whispered, "Foot-boy?"

She quietly laughed and shrugged, positioning a throw pillow under her head and focusing on the television.

Maybe one day they could figure it all out, but she didn't want them to rush into something if they weren't ready. Their timing was poor, but they would be okay. Steve was her best friend and she would be fine if that was all he could ever be for her.

14. Chapter Thirteen, Part Two

Summary for the Chapter:

“I heard all about the bat incident.” This time, she smirked at the younger girl, but she was still concerned. Hearing that Billy had put his hands on her had her wanting to drive to his house now and recreate that moment with a different outcome. “You should’ve hit him for real.”

Notes for the Chapter:

This is something I wrote for Chapter Thirteen. At the time, I felt that it didn’t add much to that particular chapter, but I do think it has some importance. It’s set right after the events of Chapter Thirteen and I’ve tilted it Part Two of that chapter for that reason. This is for @nightybreeze!

“Billy’s staring at you again,” Steve muttered to Jacqueline and she rolled her eyes, refusing to look at either boy. They were sitting in Steve’s car before going into the school while she tried to finish her homework. She miraculously fell asleep before she could get to it, so she spent the drive to school sloppily jotting down her answers.

“He’s not.”

He was. The past week, she’d been hanging out with Max more often and it undoubtedly caught Billy’s attention. Jacqueline found him watching her more times that she was comfortable with in the hallways, but he hadn’t approached her since the day he mentioned the alien abduction rumor to her. (That one still amused her.) She didn’t like it, but she was too concerned about Max’s safety to care what he had on his mind when he looked at her.

Steve made a sound deep in his throat which she knew meant he was trying not to argue with her, so she turned her attention to him.

“Let him stare.” Jacqueline shrugged and forced herself not to reach

forward and smooth the crease of his eyebrows. "You don't see me staring back, do you?"

Thankfully all of Steve's bruises and cuts were healed, but she could still clearly see the damage when she thought about it. And Max's words about him from a few days earlier unnerved her. Billy had some serious anger management issues.

"He what?" Jacqueline raised her voice, causing Max to jump slightly. "Sorry." She lowered her voice as she glanced down at Max's arms, looking for any sign of bruising.

The girl rubbed one of her wrists, her left one, and Jacqueline immediately tensed.

"He doesn't mess with me anymore, I swear," Max said.

"I heard all about the bat incident." This time, she smirked at the younger girl, but she was still concerned. Hearing that Billy had put his hands on her had her wanting to drive to his house now and recreate that moment with a different outcome. "You should've hit him for real."

Max shrugged response and Jacqueline thought about her own experience in Billy's car. Not that she was going to mention it to Max, she barely wanted to think about her drunken lapse in judgement, but she knew firsthand how forceful he could be. Max was only thirteen. Jacqueline wasn't much bigger than the girl, but it felt wrong to turn a blind eye to that sort of abuse, even if it wasn't occurring anymore. She didn't know it couldn't pick up again under the right circumstances.

"Do you - why do you think he does that?" Jacqueline asked, hoping that Max didn't think she was blaming her for anything. "Not that he should do any of that. I just mean, is there something going on that sets him off?"

Now Max looked down at her hands and shrugged once again.

"My stepdad."

"What do you mean?"

"He yells a lot, and it's always at Billy. It could be about anything."

Max's eyes met hers. "I think my mom is scared of Neil, too."

Jacqueline felt her stomach sink at the words.

"Has he, your step dad, ever yelled at you?"

Max shook her head, but said, "Not really. He's started a couple of times, but not when my mom's around, and Billy gets most of it."

Jacqueline wasn't the most physically affectionate person, except for when it came to Steve, and that was a complicated situation, but she couldn't help but reach forward and wrap her fingers around one of Max's smaller hands.

"Are you safe?"

"I'm fine. Billy's not bothering me, I swear, Jacqueline."

"And your step dad?"

"I don't think he would touch me if he wants to keep my mom around."

The words did little to calm her fears, but Jacqueline nodded and squeezed Max's hand.

That led to where she was with Steve now, still in his car and ignoring Billy's presence across the parking lot.

"I'm going to tell you something, and you have to swear not to do anything stupid."

"That doesn't give me a lot of options." Jacqueline snorted and shook her head, watching Steve's expression turn embarrassed. "That's not what I meant."

"I know." She closed her textbook and turned in the passenger seat to face him fully. "It's just, Max said something the other day that worried me."

Without another word, Steve visibly tensed up and Jacqueline did touch him this time, grasping his shoulder in a soft grip.

"Let me talk before you react," she said. All she got in response was a nod, though his jaw clenched. "I was talking to Max the other night when I took her home. We were talking about the incident at the Byers' house."

Again, Steve stiffened and she moved her hand up to his neck, not rubbing her thumb against his skin but holding it there on his pulse. Her other fingers rested on the back of his neck. It was an intimate hold, and she knew it, but he relaxed under her touch, so that was enough reason for her to do it.

"She told me he used to grab her wrist and yell at her and break her things. He hasn't since that night, she swears, but it sounds like his dad is not a good guy."

"Tree, meet apple," Steve murmured and she nodded in agreement.

"I think his dad is abusing him," she said. Steve turned his eyes to her face and immediately started shaking his head.

"No, don't *you* do anything stupid."

"I just want to make sure she's safe, Steve," Jacqueline said softly. "I already have enough trouble sleeping without adding this on top of it."

That sounded selfish, and she truly was doing it for Max's wellbeing, but her sleeping had been rough the past couple nights since talking to Max about Billy.

"Then let me take care of it."

"He tried to kill you." She sighed. "I'm going to talk to him, but I'll do it here where he can't do anything unless he wants to make a huge scene." It wasn't like she was asking his permission to talk to Billy, but she felt it necessary that someone knew what she was planning, and why. "And, besides, I'm not afraid of him."

Removing her hand from his neck, she smiled over at him before putting her book into her backpack.

"You never did tell me why you slapped him," Steve said and she

glanced at him over her shoulder.

“That’s a story for another time, trust me.”

Before he could try to get any information out of her, she opened the door and stepped out of the BMW. Billy was still leaning against his car with his attention now on a blonde sitting on the hood. Steve came around and stopped in front of her, effectively blocking Billy from her view.

“I’m doing this for Max,” she said. She noted the way he lifted his hand before dropping it down to his side.

“Be careful.”

“I always am.” Placing her bag on her shoulder, she turned to walk to the front entrance. All she could hear behind her was Steve’s sarcastic laugh.

Throughout the rest of the day, Jacqueline would turn around anytime she was in the hall and, sure enough, there was Billy Hargrove watching her. She didn’t know what he was thinking. It wasn’t until the end of the day that she was able to get away from Steve or Nancy or Jonathan long enough - if she didn’t know any better, she would have believed that Steve told the other two of her plan and they were trying to run interference - to corner him.

Of course he was with Tommy and Carol, the couple flanking him as they stood at Carol’s locker. It didn’t matter, though. She needed to talk to him and she was going to get it done, awkwardness be damned.

“Hey,” she said in way of greeting, earning a confused glance from Tommy and an amused one from Carol.

“Did Steve get tired of his rebound?” Carol mocked, closing her locker to turn her full attention to Jacqueline. No doubt she was wanting a reaction out of her, but she looked to Billy instead.

“I need to talk to you.”

He immediately raised his eyebrows.

“Do you?” A smirk grew on his lips and then he licked them. It took a lot out of her to not recoil right then. “Thought you said you never wanted me to talk to you again.”

“Has that ever stopped you?”

Billy assessed her carefully. “So what’d you want?” He was suddenly leering at her and Jacqueline had to resist the urge to hit him over the head with her Trapper Keeper.

“Stop trying to flirt with me,” she snapped. “I’m not interested. I want to *talk* to you.”

Carol opened her mouth, but Tommy wrapped an arm around her before saying they were going to head out. Billy said bye to them before focusing back on Jacqueline.

“Fine. What is it?”

“We should go -” She stopped herself before she could say ‘somewhere more private,’ because that would surely set him back on the flirting path. “Let’s go to Ms. Harris’ room.”

She pointed across the hall to the art class. It was always one of the first classes to empty out at the end of the day and the door was propped open.

“Fine.” He took off and she followed, kicking the door stopper out of place and leaning against the door for support. Billy was sitting on the edge of the desk with his arms folded in front of himself.

“So, I talked to Max about some stuff the other day and, she didn’t say anything specific, but I think I figured out something. It just concerned me.” She tapped her foot. It might have been a bad move to close the door and shut herself in a room alone with him. “Is she - Are the two of you... safe at home?”

Billy’s eyes automatically turned to slits and she raised her hands in front of her body. His reaction was all she needed to know the answer.

“Wait. Look, I know what you did to Lucas and Steve, and that was completely unacceptable, and you got so lucky that you didn’t get your ass hauled off to jail that night, but -”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Maybe not.” She sighed but kept eye contact with him. “But I need you to swear to me that Max is not in any danger from anyone.” Hoping that her words were clear to him, that she included him in that, she took a step forward. It would be a few years before Max could get out of that house, maybe just another before Billy left himself, and she was going to help keep the girl safe. “Just know that if you lie to me and something happens to her, I have major connections to the Hawkins Police Department.”

Billy’s hands clenched into fists and Jacqueline watched him. For a second, she thought he would lunge at her, but instead he dropped his eyes.

“She’ll be alright,” he said after a couple of minutes of silence.

“Good.” Jacqueline smiled and moved to the door, grabbing the doorknob. She turned back once more. “She said you weren’t being a jerk anymore, but you have a lot to make up for, Billy. Get your act together.”

A groan sounded from him, but he didn’t say anything more as she left the room.

Steve was right there waiting for her when she came out of the room and she smiled, biting her lip at the sight of him.

“Everything okay?”

“I think it will be,” she said, wanting to reach for his hand, but instead gripping her bag tightly. “Can we go?”

“My house or yours?”

“Just take me home,” she said, and she didn’t have to look at him to see that he knew her meaning. Either place was fine by her.

15. Chapter Fourteen

Summary for the Chapter:

She had seen this look before, the way his eyes were full of love and longing, but they had always been directed toward Nancy. Or at least she thought.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a big chapter! There may an epilogue to tie up some loose ends, but for now, this is the end. Thanks to everyone who has liked, reblogged, and commented on this. This is the first multi-chapter fic that I've ever written and finished, as well as my first OC fic, so I'm quite proud of it. Please let me know what you think! I'm afraid I messed up on the timeline a bit and should have included Barb's funeral in the last chapter, but work with me here... :)

Barb's funeral was a small event. Steve was the one to bring up going, thinking it would be the right thing to do for the girl's memory, but Jacqueline also knew he was going out of guilt. His relationship with Nancy had officially begun the night Barb went missing and Nancy made it clear during their breakup that it was their fault she died. It wasn't true, of course, and Jacqueline tried to convince him of this, but there were some wounds even she couldn't heal.

Jacqueline spent the burial with her eyes glued to the picture of Barb sitting next to the casket. The *empty* casket.

When it was over, Steve decided to go talk to Barb's parents. He'd told her about the dinners he and Nancy would go to with the Holland's and how horrible he (and Nancy) felt any time they would mention their continued search for Barb. She would never be able to understand that the same way as Nancy, and in some ways she was thankful to not have to feel it, but she would always be connected to Barb through the Upside Down. That was almost as painful, she

imagined.

"I'll stay here," she said, letting go of Steve's hand which she had been gripping since they walked out to the cemetery. Or perhaps he was holding onto her. Maybe both.

"You sure?"

She nodded.

"I'll be right back," Steve said before walking over to the Holland's. There was a small crowd gathered around them, including Nancy, and Jacqueline looked away to find Jonathan.

It wasn't that she didn't want to give them her condolences, but she'd never met Barb's parents before, and it felt a little strange to go over with Steve while Nancy was also talking to them. The Holland's knew Nancy and they knew Nancy and Steve as a couple.

It had been two weeks since she told Steve she loved him, two weeks since they agreed to pretend it never happened, and Jacqueline had been doing a pretty good job at it. But Steve was still hung up on Nancy, and seeing the two of them interact, as stilted as it was, caused a sharp pain to hit her in the chest. It was hard. She wanted to move on from her feelings and be just friends again so badly, but witnessing the exes interact at all hurt.

"Are you doing okay?" Jonathan asked when she moved to stand next to him. He must have been feeling the same way about Nancy and Steve. Since the Gate was closed and Jacqueline was rescued from the tunnels, it was obvious to everyone that Nancy and Jonathan's relationship was progressing. Jacqueline was happy for her friends, especially knowing how much Jonathan cared for the girl over the past year, even if it was something else that was awkward in their lives. In fact, she barely saw Jonathan since then. She was either with Steve or Jonathan was with Nancy when they took Will home from hanging out with the other kids.

"I'm fine." It was an automatic response at that point. It wasn't a lie; she was doing much better than she expected after everything that happened. Sometimes she would get scared out of nowhere, but she

could reel herself in, reminding herself where she was and that everything was over. Other times, Steve was able to do it and those were the moments she started to believe he actually loved her. Then they would go back to whatever they were doing before without another word. Fine felt fitting. Not great, but good enough.

Jonathan's eyes were still on Nancy, Steve, and the Holland's as he spoke.

"Sorry we haven't hung out in a while."

"It's okay, Jonathan. I know you've been spending a lot of time with Nancy." She glanced over at him. "I understand."

"Yeah, we're trying to figure it out." When Jonathan looked at her, he was more relaxed than she'd ever seen him. His face was fuller and the circles under his eyes were faded.

"I'm happy for you, for both of you."

Jacqueline knew just how much Jonathan cared for Nancy, how much he loved her, and despite how uncomfortable everything with the four of them could be, she was glad that two of her friends were figuring things out. She was irritated with Nancy to a degree since it sounded like her feelings for Jonathan had always been stronger than those she had for Steve, but they still deserved a real love. And she knew what it was like to be a teenage girl with conflicting feelings.

Jonathan's lips quirked into a smile even with the somber mood of the funeral.

"Maybe you can come over sometime to hang out with me and Will."

"That would be great. There's plenty of time with winter break coming up." She let her eyes travel over to the group before focusing back on her friend. "Is Will going to the Snowball?"

"If mom will let him out of her sight," he said and she laughed softly before sobering. "I volunteered to take pictures, so I'll be there to watch out for him."

Jacqueline glanced over at Steve and Nancy, who were now standing

away from the Holland's. She couldn't hear their conversation, but they were talking to each other. There was that pain in her chest again. She looked down and then said, "I told Steve I love him."

Jonathan was silent for a moment, probably out of shock. The fact that she told Steve still surprised *her*. If anyone understood her trust issues as well as her love for her best friend, it was Jonathan.

"When? Are you together now?"

"No." She shook her head quickly. "No, nothing like that happened. It was two weeks ago. I told him and he tried to tell me he felt the same way, but he's still hurting. We're acting like it never happened."

Jonathan turned to face her and she looked up to meet his eyes.

"Why? Do you think he would lie to you?"

She faltered as she tried to work out how to put it into words.

"I just think he's still dealing with the breakup and everything else and, I don't know, it would be easy for him to convince himself to move on with me."

For a minute, she forgot that she was talking to Jonathan, the guy currently dating Steve's ex-girlfriend. This wasn't the summer when she told Jonathan all about her love for Steve. They were no longer both yearning for someone else.

"Jacqueline," Jonathan started. "Sorry if this sounds mean, but you're being stupid."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Maybe I'm not Steve's biggest fan, but has he *ever* lied to you about what he feels about anything?"

"No," she said slowly, her body beginning to heat up even in the November weather. "But -"

"You're only going to hurt yourself and him if you let yourself believe he would do that to you. I saw how he was when he was looking for

you. That's not someone looking for a rebound, okay?"

Jacqueline peeked around his shoulder to see Steve and Nancy walking back toward them.

"He's still hurting and I don't want to mess up our friendship by forcing this."

"Just so you know, I don't think you would be forcing anything." Jonathan shrugged and moved around to stand next to her again as the others' footsteps in the fall leaves grew closer. "I worried about that, too, and everything worked out."

Before she could say another word, Steve walked over and placed a hand on her elbow. She practically flinched.

"What?" He asked and she shook her head, smiling in Nancy's direction.

Maybe she didn't want to go over to Barb's parents, but she could give Nancy some comfort after she watched her best friend's burial. Stepping forward, Jacqueline awkwardly hugged her. They both stiffly patted each other's backs before Nancy relaxed and gripped her to her chest.

"Barb would have been happy to know you came," Nancy whispered in her ear. They hadn't spoken much in the last couple of weeks, other than in the school hallways, but they were still friends. Nancy went out of her way several times to see if Jacqueline was doing okay, so it was the least she could do for the girl.

"She would have been even happier to know everything you went through for her."

"Thanks, Jacqueline."

Jacqueline pulled away first, both girls now with tears in their eyes. Without another word, they stepped back over to the boys and they all stood in silence until Steve broke it.

"We're gonna go," he said and gently took Jacqueline's elbow again to guide her toward his car.

“Bye, Jonathan. Bye, Nancy.” Jacqueline waved to the other two who said ‘bye’ as well, Steve tilting his head in their direction.

The walk to his car was quiet. He moved his hand to her back and let her into the car first before going to get in himself.

She sat in the passenger seat with her eyes facing forward as she thought about everything that happened in the last few hours. Hearing everything Barb’s family said about her, watching her being lowered into the ground, talking to Jonathan about Nancy and Steve. It was all too much.

Her breathing sped up as she sat there, Steve watching her before he started talking.

“I know that was a lot,” he said, starting the car but not pulling away. It would take a few minutes for it to warm up. “But you did really good.”

He was trying to make her feel better and distract her from the panic building in her chest, but this time it wasn’t working.

“It’s not fair. It’s not fair that she died and Will and I are fine. It’s just not fair, Steve.” She bit her lip as she attempted to keep her tears at bay. No matter how hard she tried, they slid down her cheeks. “It’s not fair.”

“Jac, look at me. What isn’t fair is that it happened to any of you,” Steve said, moving a hand to cup her face and make her look at him. “But we have to move on.”

“Easier said than done.”

“I know, but I don’t want to keep thinking about how I almost lost you.”

Jacqueline closed her eyes as Steve ran a finger across one of her cheeks and then the other, wiping her tears away.

“You should know by now that it’s pretty hard to get rid of me,” she said, opening her eyes to look at him. What she saw in them was enough to take her breath. His eyes were unguarded and more

serious than she'd ever seen before.

"Jac, I mean, I don't want to be without you, *ever*."

"You won't be," she whispered, grabbing his hand. His other still held her face and she leaned her cheek into his palm.

"I get why you don't want me to say this, but we need to move on from everything that's happened." Steve pressed his forehead to hers. "I *do* love you."

She pulled away in surprise before she opened her mouth to speak, but she didn't know what to say. It took a long moment of staring at him before it registered for her. She had seen this look before, the way his eyes were full of love and longing, but they had always been directed toward Nancy. Or at least she thought. Jacqueline took a deep breath and let it out, the exhale sounding like a laugh.

"You're serious."

"Yeah."

"Completely serious."

"Do you remember that time I came to your house after I fought with Andrew?" When she nodded, he continued. "I was going to tell you that I liked you then, but I chickened out."

"And then I got into a fight with Carol and you started dating Nancy."

"Then we weren't friends for a few months."

Her nose scrunched up at the thought of the time they weren't friends and Steve smiled at her.

"Do you still love me?"

She scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"That's the dumbest thing you've ever said," she replied tightening her grip on his hand. "Of course I do! I couldn't stop in two weeks."

She couldn't stop in two years.

"Good." Steve grinned at her and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead before pulling back without another word. She was left sitting there in confusion.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking you home."

"You're -" She cleared her throat. "You just told me that you love me and you're not going to say anything else or-or kiss me?"

"We're in a cemetery," he reminded her and she glanced out the window, cheeks immediately coloring.

"Right."

"But, as soon as we get to my house, we can talk some more."

The day had been full of so many emotions, the worst and the best ones, but she understood why Steve chose that moment to tell her how he felt. It wasn't only time to move on, it was time to move forward.

Steve glanced over at Jacqueline every couple of minutes while he drove. She didn't say anything the entire time and it was clear she was lost in her thoughts. He was slightly concerned that she was going to try to talk him out of this confession again, but he was going to fight this time.

When he pulled up to the house, he had to say her name to get her attention.

"Are you ready to go in?" He asked, hoping that speaking wasn't going to ruin everything and scare her away. "My parents aren't home."

They rarely were, but after the emotional day, he figured Jacqueline needed to know they had the house to themselves.

Jacqueline nodded and got out of the car. She still didn't speak and Steve couldn't help the anxiety that was starting to course through his veins. What if she told him they couldn't do this? It had only been a few weeks since his breakup with Nancy and Jacqueline could refuse to talk about this until it had been longer. He wasn't sure he could handle that. Now that he finally told her over a year after he planned to, there was no going back for him. He meant what he told her; he wanted to move on, and he wanted - no, needed - to do that with her.

Once they were in the house, he watched in ever-growing silence while Jacqueline took off her coat and slipped off her heels. Was it possible that she realized how comfortable she was in his house? She'd called it 'home' several times. That had to be some kind of hint that their relationship was already different from most friendships. He'd been thinking about that a lot after she told him she loved him. He should have known. Jacqueline making herself at home eased some of his nervousness. It didn't look like she wanted to leave.

With that thought, he smiled to himself before removing his own coat.

Jacqueline was lost in her own head which was obvious to Steve as she moved further into the house. She still wasn't talking, but that didn't worry Steve in itself. No, Jacqueline was often quiet while she tried to work things out on her own, but the thing that got him was that she seemed to want him to kiss her in the car and now it was like she'd forgotten all about it.

Was something wrong?

When she turned around, she shrugged. "I don't know," she started with a frown. "I don't know what we're supposed to do or say now."

She looked like a deer caught in the headlights as she gazed at him, big brown eyes open wide in such a vulnerable way. Steve stepped forward.

"It's okay."

Reaching her, he gently grasped her shoulders and met her eyes. He

was feeling open and exposed, too, if he was being completely honest. For Jacqueline, he realized, this was probably the first time she was in a situation like this one. She'd only dated a few guys as far as Steve knew, and nothing serious. This was big deal for both of them and he didn't want her to be scared of it. He didn't want her to be afraid of being with him.

For the first few days after she told him how she felt, Steve was confused and a little angry. He wasn't mad at her but with her wanting to pretend she didn't say it. She wanted to pretend that *he* didn't feel the same, and he just couldn't do that. Some other people may have been able to do that, but that wasn't him.

"Do you just want to sit? We don't have to talk right now."

It pained him to say that. He wanted to talk; he needed to talk so they could work things out, but if she wasn't ready, he couldn't force it without potentially causing some problems. And he promised her nothing could ruin them.

Jacqueline only nodded before looking at him. Usually she would walk into the living room or up to his room, she would plop down onto the couch, she would turn on the television, she would go through his tapes. This time, she wasn't moving. When she looked at him again with the same startled expression, he realized that she was wanting for his guidance. It was his turn to make the first move.

Standing in the Harrington's entryway, Jacqueline searched Steve's face for even the tiniest hint of... something. Anything to tell her what direction to go in because she was unsure. She could read every emotion as it flickered across his face, but she still didn't know what to *do*.

She believed Steve when he told her nothing could ruin them, but she was still scared.

She only had to wait a couple minutes time spent pondering their options, letting her eyes flick from Steve to the door. She didn't want to run away this time. It was just nerve wracking waiting to see what move Steve was going to make. Then he leaned down a couple inches

until their foreheads touched. She took in a deep breath but relaxed against him.

“I won’t let this change us,” he whispered, his breath fanning against her face. With a nod, she wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

“But -” She got out before he made a sound of protest.

“But what?”

Jacqueline sighed and said, “We can’t just jump into anything without talking about it.”

“Why not?” There was a hint of frustration in his voice but the pout on his face was fake. That alone cut a lot of the tension and Jacqueline half-heartedly poked him in the back. Then she laughed.

“We’ve been friends too long to not talk about how this would change everything.”

“Isn’t that the point? We would be more than that. That’s all.”

Jacqueline bit her lip. He was right and she would love to take this step, but they were graduating in less than seven months. Being together would change so much of their futures and, if they were a couple, parting for college would be much harder. He had to know.

“And, besides,” he said before she could voice her concerns. “Maybe we’ve been more than friends for a long time.”

Steve pulled back slightly to look at the necklace resting on her chest. It was the moon and star necklace from Nancy the Christmas before though Jacqueline knew it was secretly from Steve. The sentiment from Nancy was sweet at the time, but it meant more to her because of Steve’s involvement in helping to pick it out and likely being the one to purchase it. “How many best friends do you know that touch all the time?”

He punctuated his words by running two fingers from the pendant to her neck in a featherlight touch.

“Does this feel like just a friend to you?”

Capturing her bottom lip between her teeth, she slowly shook her head.

“No,” he murmured, continuing up her neck until he cupped her cheek. “I know you’re scared, but we don’t have to make this complicated. I think we’ve been ready.”

She couldn’t help but smile at him. He sounded wiser than she’d ever heard him before and she was proud of that. Of course she was; he was her best friend, but he had a point. All their little touches added up to a complex puzzle of the way they showed each other how they felt. And that puzzle was almost complete.

“Have you been thinking about this?”

Steve ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

“For weeks.”

“What if -” She cut herself off because she didn’t know what to say.

“Don’t,” Steve said and he pulled body flush against his, eyes staring into hers. “Don’t run from us.”

His voice cracked and she froze, throat constricting as she took a stuttering breath. His words snapped her out of her doubts and she surged up, capturing his lips in an almost bruising kiss. He kissed her back with so much fervor that she could have sworn her heart skipped a beat. He cupped her other cheek as they kissed, pulling her lips even closer. There was never anyone like Steve who knew how to touch her just right to convey the exact emotion she needed. A simple touch for support, a hug of comfort, or a kiss of true, unwavering love. This was all the confirmation she needed that they were doing something right. When they pulled apart, she smiled softly.

“I won’t run.” She bit her lip before pressing them to his again. “I swear.”

This was actually happening. She never let herself believe that they could be together, but Steve was full of surprises.

“You really love me,” she said, voice full of wonder.

"I do." Steve squeezed her hip before leading her to the couch where he plopped down and pulled her onto his lap.

"Steve!" She shouted out in surprise, but Steve only laughed and leaned in to kiss her again, so she couldn't be irritated for long. Not when he was kissing her like he was trying to memorize the feel of her lips.

After a few minutes of kissing, Jacqueline adjusted herself on his lap so she was straddling his thighs. She looked down at him and worried her bottom lip.

"Is this okay?"

"It's fine," he said, resting his hands high on her waist. "Anything you want to do is fine."

With a soft laugh, she leaned into him again. God, she never wanted to stop kissing him. Now that she knew how it felt to have his lips on hers, she could do it all the time. She could do it forever. That was kind of the plan.

"This is what I want to do."

Pecking his lips, she let her mouth trail from his to his jaw and then his neck. He was like a magnet. With the way he moaned softly, the noise alone causing a shiver to run through her body, it sounded like he didn't want to stop either. When one of his hands squeezed her thigh, Jacqueline involuntarily rolled her hips against his. Another moan fell from his lips. She could feel the vibrations in his throat under her lips and her hips canted forward again. Then she realized what she was doing and pulled back.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. Her cheeks were burning but Steve shook his head.

"It's okay. I mean it." He pressed a gentle kiss to her neck and her eyes slid shut. "Don't be shy with me now, Jac."

Jacqueline made a sound in the back of her throat, either a sound of agreement or a moan. It was enough to spur him on. Despite making out with a few boys before, this was the first time anyone had ever

really touched her this way. It made sense that it was Steve.

Those kisses had been nothing compared to this. Her body was reacting to each kiss in ways she never thought possible, but she felt safe in his arms and that meant so much now. She smiled.

“You make me feel safe,” she whispered, more to herself than to Steve.

His resulting words were almost enough to make her cry. “I won’t let anything hurt you.”

“I know.” She slid a hand up the back of his neck and into the hair at the nape. “Do I get special permission to touch your hair now?”

He scoffed, moving his lips away from her neck, to which she responded with an exaggerated pout.

“You already had it.”

“Well, it’s been a while.” Her hand travelled further up until she was holding the back of his head. He tilted his head back into her hand. “You look really cute like this,” she said before giggling a bit at herself. Now that she could say and do whatever she wanted with him, she was letting all sorts of things out.

“And you look beautiful all the time.” He moved one of his hands up her leg, resting just under the skirt of her dress. Again, her body heated up.

“When - When will your parents be home?”

“Tomorrow night,” he replied, dark eyes staring into hers.

“Take me to your room.”

They stared at each other for a long moment in a silent conversation before Jacqueline nodded.

"I have an idea," Steve said later, thumb running lazily along the bare skin of her shoulder.

"Hmm?" Her eyes were closed, but she was tuned into the sound of his voice and the rumble of his chest under her ear as he spoke.

"After graduation, we should leave."

That got her full attention and she sat up in shock.

"Leave?"

"Yeah, for a little while," Steve replied after recovering from staring at her now completely exposed chest. They hadn't had sex - she wasn't ready for that step yet - but somehow they'd still ended up with most of their clothes removed. She blushed but didn't move to cover up. "We can go on a road trip, just the two of us, to work on being together."

"That's in over five months." Jacqueline settled back into his arms, but not before pressing her lips gingerly to his. "Don't you think we should already be used to this by then?"

She was smiling the entire time she spoke and Steve returned it with one of his own.

"Well, yeah, but it would be romantic."

A soft laugh escaped her, but she was still smiling, and now there was a faint blush coloring her cheeks. She pressed her forehead to his chest.

"It would be. I think we already have it figured out anyway." She took his hand and played with his fingers, tracing the lines of his palm. "But it would be nice to get away for awhile."

Jacqueline loved Hawkins, it was her home, but getting out for even a week was tempting. Having time to explore this new relationship with Steve without anyone they knew around was the cherry on top. She looked back up at him.

"Let's do it."

The way Steve pulled her closer to his chest brought out a contented sigh from her lips. The past couple years had been heartbreaking, frightening, and defeating. They still had some obstacles, but they would be worth it.